

THE RAY OF DOOM

THE RAY OF DOOM

A DETECTIVE NOVEL

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TO
MY FATHER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My characters are all imaginary, and no reference to any living person is intended. It should be unnecessary to mention this in a book which is obviously pure fiction, but I do so because in "The Harness of Death" I inadvertently trod heavily upon someone's toes in this manner, for which I hereby apologise.

The fiction writer's difficulty is that all his names, however he chooses them, are bound to be duplicated in real life. The only truly safe plan would be to number the characters!

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. HIRST'S GARAGE - - - - -	II
II. FRESH IDEAS - - - - -	20
III. THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS - - - - -	38
IV. COINCIDENCE OR . . . ? - - - - -	53
V. FIRSTFRUITS - - - - -	62
VI. THE MEETING OF THE CABINET - - - - -	79
VII. DRURY HAS AN IDEA - - - - -	110
VIII. CHICAGO TAKES A HAND - - - - -	121
IX. THE CARD INDEX - - - - -	138
X. THE DANGEROUS SAFE - - - - -	152
XI. ENTER THE O.G.P.U. - - - - -	166
XII. THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT - - - - -	182
XIII. THE FINAL MESSAGE - - - - -	193
XIV. THE CODE MESSAGE - - - - -	207
XV. THE SÉANCE - - - - -	229
XVI. THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH - - - - -	262
XVII. NONT SARAH'S - - - - -	277

CHAPTER I

HIRST'S GARAGE

BILL HIRST's business premises were not impressive. They consisted of a dilapidated shed at the back of the George Hotel, mostly built of corrugated iron and roofing felt. In front of this was a small and extremely untidy yard, littered with the decaying remnants of discarded cars. Nothing was ever thrown away by the proprietor, for his was the class of trade in which derelicts formed a quarry from which spare parts could be dug and subsequently fitted to customers' vehicles at small cost. The lordly simplicity of sending to the makers for new parts was a method ill adapted to the finances of the neighbourhood.

By stepping carefully over an evil-smelling puddle of carbide which had leaked from the acetylene welding generator, and then by rounding the jagged corners of a bare and twisted chassis which sprawled across a heap of rusty mudguards, and by avoiding a pile of tattered horsehair cushions it was possible to cross the yard and get to the garage itself. The door, a relic of alterations and improvements at the

THE RAY OF DOOM

George Hotel, was of frosted glass and bore the misleading inscription "Saloon Bar." Below this was written in copying-ink pencil "Hirst's Garage. No admittance except on business." Customers never took any notice of this injunction but always opened the door and went straight in. It was the only door, anyway.

The equipment inside this ramshackle garage was surprisingly good. Whatever Bill Hirst's faults as a business man and organiser, he was a first-rate mechanic and proud of the work he turned out. One end of the shed was set aside as the machine shop and was full of lathes, drills, grindstones and welding apparatus huddled together as closely as possible in order to make the most of the very limited space available. The rest of the building was filled by two cars in for repairs. A bucket stood on the front seat of one of them for the purpose of catching the rain that leaked in through the flimsy roof, thus bearing silent witness to the truth of the statement on Bill's invoices—"Every care taken with customers' cars."

Although it was eleven o'clock at night the electric motor was humming and Bill was working at the lathe. It was one of the peculiarities of this unpractical individual that he preferred working late. He rarely got up before midday, much to the annoyance of early customers, but to compensate for this his lights

HIRST'S GARAGE

were generally burning until one or two o'clock in the morning. There was no advantage to be gained by this eccentric behaviour—the garage was in a back street miles away from any road important enough to bear night traffic. It was merely that Bill preferred to do things like that, regardless of the inconvenience to his customers and the unnecessary size of his electric light bill. He had, too, a contemptuous disdain for the less interesting branches of his work, which he would cheerfully abandon if anything out of the ordinary turned up. If you took your car to Bill to be decarbonised you could guarantee that the work would be well and carefully done, but no one could say when it would be done. If it was promised for Friday evening and if you knew his failings in this respect you would give him a day's grace and call for it on Saturday afternoon, only to find that the job had not even been started. Bill would explain that he had been very busy machining special castings for a newly invented potato-peeling machine designed by the proprietor of the fish and chip shop round the corner, and would spend a couple of hours demonstrating the beauties of his recently acquired capstan lathe, bought for half a crown as junk and reconditioned by himself.

The man's obvious enthusiasm as a craftsman was the only thing which made his often irate customers overlook his grave deficiencies in

THE RAY OF DOOM

common-sense business methods. The simplest solution to the problem would have been for Bill to employ a man to do the routine work, but this was out of the question, for the business was not big enough to afford it and never would be big enough while it was carried on in such an unconventional manner. In spite of it all Bill was perfectly happy. So long as he earned enough to live on and to potter about among his beloved lathes he asked no more of life.

At the moment he was engaged in turning steel bolts for a surgical instrument maker, who found it cheaper to order limited numbers of special sizes from a one-man firm than to get them from the big manufacturers, whose price lists catered only for the very large buyer. The little capstan lathe was working very well and Bill was producing a finished bolt from the steel rod every forty-five seconds. At the throb of an engine in the yard outside he switched off the motor and brushed away the accumulation of steel shavings before collecting his little pile of finished bolts and putting them away in a drawer. There was a sound of tearing cloth outside the door, and a man limped into the garage swearing profusely.

"Why the devil don't you tidy up that yard of yours, Bill?" he began. "Look what I've done to my trousers on your beastly scrap-heap."

HIRST'S GARAGE

Bill was not at all perturbed. He took a cigarette end from behind his ear and lit it.

"You should look where you're going, Mr. Playfair. The yard's all right. What do you want to come at this time for, anyway?"

"Because if I come in daylight you're always in bed, you lazy devil. Well, I've brought that old car along at last. I put her just inside the gate because the batteries are done and the lamps'll only work when the engine's running. Have a look at her and let's know the worst."

Bill put on his coat and went out. An extremely decrepit car was standing in the yard. It was old, dented and battered, obviously too far gone to have any second-hand value except as scrap. The footboards were broken, the hood was torn, the mudguards were loose and the lamps were twisted and shaky. Bill swung the starting handle and the engine fired at once. He listened for a moment or two before switching it off. It was evidently in good order, and that was all that mattered. He wanted an engine of this make and date for a customer's car, and if he could make a profit on the deal the rest of the car was unimportant.

"I'll give you a pound for it," he said at length.

"A pound? How do you mean, a pound? Do you want me to give you the thing?" said Mr. Playfair in anguished tones.

Bill at once gave up all hope of completing the deal. He couldn't charge his client much

THE RAY OF DOOM

for a second-hand engine, and if Playfair was asking a ridiculous price for his old scrap-heap—fifteen or twenty pounds, say—the whole thing was off. It was a pity, for it would mean looking round for another old car of that make. "Well, how much do you want for it?" he asked.

"Thirty bob," was the surprising reply. Bill concealed a smile.

"I'll meet you half-way," he said. "Twenty-five bob and not a penny more." There was an interval, during which Bill rattled one of the mudguards disparagingly.

"All right," grumbled the visitor at last. "Here's the licence book."

Bill pocketed it, but showed no signs of producing the money. This would have been difficult, for his total cash resources at the moment amounted to just over two pounds. Only that morning he had been compelled to get up earlier than usual in order to collect an outstanding debt with which to pay his electricity bill, under threat of immediate disconnection.

"I'll knock it off your bill," he said at length. This was a happy thought, for Mr. Playfair already owed him several pounds, partly for repairs to the ancient car and partly for various electrical fittings specially made. Mr. Playfair was an amateur wireless enthusiast of some local repute, and frequently used apparatus of his own design in his experiments.

HIRST'S GARAGE

It was not that Bill distrusted his client. He had known him for many years and had always found him a reliable, though slow, payer. The trouble was that both men were perpetually short of money. Mr. Playfair was not at all pleased by this book-keeping transaction. However, being on balance the debtor, he could not very well object, especially as he was about to ask for further credit. Besides, Bill was so skilful and reliable in making electrical equipment from rough sketches that it would be difficult to find a substitute.

"Right you are, Bill," he agreed. "Cross it off now, then, and don't forget about it. Let's see you do it."

Bill led the way into what was euphemistically called "the office"—a corner of the workshop where a small desk stood behind a wooden screen. Taking a twopenny notebook from a drawer he tried to mark off the amount with ink, and failed owing to the oily state of its pages. Finally the feat was accomplished successfully with a carpenter's pencil, the hard point of which bit through the greasy finger-marks decorating the pages of the book.

"I've got some more stuff for you to make, Bill," went on Mr. Playfair. "There's a lot of it this time." He took a large sheet of paper from his pocket and unfolded it under the light. It was full of rough sketches of complicated objects—roughly drawn and crude compared

THE RAY OF DOOM

to the bleak neatness of engineers' blue-prints, but very complete as regards measurements and full specifications of material. Some of the parts were of brass, others of steel, others again of bakelite, that wonderful artificial resin which is used so extensively in automobile and electrical engineering.

Bill bent forward and surveyed the diagrams with interest. Here was a job after his own heart. Nothing pleased him more than to create out of formless material something neat and exact and beautifully finished. In a humble way he experienced the thrill of the sculptor, under whose hands a shapeless mass becomes a work of art. (It should be understood that this metaphor does not apply to the ultra-modern school of sculptors, under whose hands a shapeless mass merely becomes another kind of shapeless mass.) Instantly he forgot all about Mr. Johnson's car waiting for its new second-hand engine; forgot all about the commercial traveller's motor-cycle faithfully promised for the morning; forgot all about ordering the new battery for Makinson Brothers' Ford, which was urgently needed so that Makinson Brothers' Bakeries could distribute their bread.

"There's a lot of work here, Mr. Playfair," said Bill at last, when he had studied the roll of drawings.

"I know."

"It'll cost a good bit."

HIRST'S GARAGE

"I know."

Hints were evidently no use, so Bill tried again. He hated asking people for money, but he was very hard up and simply could not afford to allow Mr. Playfair any more credit, especially for work which would interfere with the more commercial side of his business. Occasionally, when he was more than usually pressed for money, Bill did have these flashes of common sense and imagined himself a business man on the strength of them.

"I should say it'll cost at least thirty pounds," he went on.

Mr. Playfair had expected the cost to be fifty at least, but his expression did not alter.

"Look here, Bill," he said, "I can't pay you now, but I'll let you have thirty pounds by to-morrow night certain. Will that do?"

"Aye," said Bill, looking at the plans with renewed interest. His fingers were itching to begin. He knew where there was a bit of silver steel just big enough for that queer-shaped little fellow in the middle.

CHAPTER II

FRESH IDEAS

MR. ROBERT UNWIN was a shopwalker by profession and a man of the world by disposition. He was really rather an odious little man, deferential to the point of servility to his employers and offensively familiar with the female members of the staff who were unfortunate enough to be in his department. He invariably referred to actresses by their Christian names, and talked loftily of the bookies who had the honour of his patronage. In actual fact he had never seen an actress from a closer range than the upper circle, and his bets were sporadic and limited to sixpences. However, the shop staff at Mason & Archer's, Ltd., took him at his own valuation and looked upon him as an expert on the world, the flesh and the devil.

One morning he was discoursing to the window dresser and his assistants upon the inborn intellectual superiority of the Londoner.

"Who is it who falls for the confidence trick?" he demanded. "The colonial and the American every time. Who tries to win money

FRESH IDEAS

at the three-card trick? The idiot from the provinces. Did you ever hear of a Londoner being caught by one of those chaps?" The questions were purely rhetorical, and Mr. Unwin continued his monologue. He was fond of the sound of his own voice, and he was so interested in his argument that he failed to notice the yawns of the window dresser, who had heard all this before.

"I'd like to see them try their games on me," he went on, glaring fiercely at Miss Bates of the cash desk. Here at least he was sure of a listener—Miss Bates wore spectacles with thick lenses and had a snub nose. It is difficult at first sight to see why these facial imperfections should cause her to listen more carefully than the rest of the audience, but the explanation is simple. Miss Bates, being unattractive, had so far escaped the amorous attentions of Mr. Unwin. She thought him wonderful, and attributed all adverse comment to jealousy or spite. She was perhaps the only employee at Mason & Archer's who had anything good to say about him.

"Yes, if they tried their games on me they'd soon find out they'd bitten off more than they could chew. Why, they don't even bother to get fresh ideas. The same old stories have caught the same old mugs for centuries."

Here Mr. Unwin broke off and walked majestically away to attend to the wants of a little

THE RAY OF DOOM

man who was standing timidly just inside the door, looking uncertainly about him. The vastness and calm exclusiveness of Mason & Archer's, Ltd., were apt to be overpowering to new customers, and it was one of Mr. Unwin's duties to welcome them and put them at their ease. Miss Bates sighed as she turned back to her cash book. Its pages were slightly blurred by a vision of the unattainable.

"What can we have the pleasure . . ." began Mr. Unwin.

"Can I see—do you stock—er—clothing suitable for—er—hot countries?" inquired the customer nervously.

"Certainly, sir. We make rather a speciality of tropical kit. What was it you required? Coats, trousers, sun helmets?"

"I want a complete outfit." The little man seemed reassured by Mr. Unwin's suavity, and the latter, being, in spite of all his faults, a thoroughly good salesman, at once took charge of him, led him from department to department, and gave him expert advice on materials and quantities.

Thawed by this courteous attention to his needs the little man grew gradually more talkative. His name, it appeared, was Learoyd, and he was a partner in a large jewellery firm in Yorkshire. The shopwalker here raised his eyebrows, which outwardly gave him an expression of intelligent interest, but which also

FRESH IDEAS

expressed inward wonder that such things as jewellers' shops could exist in the barbaric North. Mr. Unwin was quite unable to realise that there were upwards of two hundred towns in the country bigger than the London suburb which temporarily represented his world.

"I'm going to South Africa in three months' time," said Mr. Learoyd, "and I want to have everything ready. I don't like leaving things till the last minute."

"Quite right, sir," agreed Mr. Unwin. "I hope you have a good holiday."

"Oh, it isn't exactly a holiday," explained the jeweller, putting on a sun helmet and surveying himself in the mirror. "I'm going to buy diamonds. Get 'em direct and cut out the middleman's profit. Of course it will be a nice holiday as well, and it has the advantage that the firm will pay for it. Good idea, what?"

Mr. Unwin agreed. He only wished the firm would pay for his holidays.

It was in the cabin trunk department that Mr. Learoyd discovered his loss.

"I've lost a pearl!" he exclaimed, fumbling at his waistcoat. "Clumsy of me. I was carrying it loose and I must have pulled it out with my shopping list. One gets careless in my trade."

He turned his waistcoat pockets inside out. They were lined with chamois leather for

THE RAY OF DOOM

temporary stowage of jewellery, and the most careful inspection failed to show any holes through which the missing pearl might have disappeared. To make quite sure Mr. Learoyd felt round the bottom of his waistcoat. There was nothing in the lining.

"When did you see it last, sir?" asked Mr. Unwin, greatly concerned.

"Downstairs," replied the jeweller, who was rapidly turning out all his other pockets. "I had it when I came into the shop, I'm certain." He stooped down and ran his finger round the turn-ups of his trousers. There was nothing there but the usual fluff and dust. By this time Mr. Unwin also had begun to search, and was feverishly removing the heap of trunks and suit-cases which had been brought out for Mr. Learoyd's inspection.

"Mind you don't tread on it," warned the jeweller. "Pearls aren't as tough as diamonds." He finished exploring the folds of his umbrella as he spoke. "Well, I haven't time to bother about it now. I've got an important business appointment in a quarter of an hour, and I can't possibly miss it." He scribbled on a card. "Here's my address. You are sure to find it on the floor somewhere; and if you return it to me I'll see that you don't lose by it. I shall be in any time after eight to-night. You've got all my order booked, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

FRESH IDEAS

"Right. All you've got to do is to hunt round each of the counters I've been to and you can't help finding it." He looked at his watch and prepared to depart, when apparently another thought struck him. "By the way," he went on, with some return of his former diffidence, "I can trust you, of course, but there is the question of the shop assistants. I don't want to imply . . ." he became apologetic. When people say this they are usually implying something pretty definitely. "But—er—naturally they will all join in the search and it is possible that some of them might be tempted. Er—that is, if one of them found it he might prefer to sell it rather than rely on the reward. After all, it isn't everybody who's honest, and sometimes people are so stingy with their rewards."

"I'm sure our assistants are all perfectly reliable . . ." began Mr. Unwin.

"Quite. I'm sure they are," replied Mr. Learoyd with hearty inconsistency. "And it so happens in this case that honesty will pay best; that stone will not fetch more than thirty pounds in the open market, but it is one I got specially matched for a connoisseur, and I can sell it to him for fifty. So I can offer thirty-five pounds for its return—five more than its real value. It will swamp all my profit on the deal, of course, but it serves me right for being careless. Well, I must go now. I shall lose

THE RAY OF DOOM

three times that amount if I miss my appointment. You're sure to find the confounded thing. It's in the shop somewhere. You've got my card, haven't you?"

With that he hurried away. Mr. Unwin's first feeling was one of respect for a dealer in such large transactions, but it was quickly replaced by contempt for the foolish provincial who carried jewels loose in his pocket. By contrast his next action showed his own smartness. He spread the news among all the staff—but he edited it first, and took care to reduce Mr. Learoyd's figures by a very considerable margin.

"It's worth four pounds, Miss Bates," he explained, "but there is five pounds reward offered for it, so keep a good look out." Miss Bates smiled a little wryly. Five pounds sounded good to her, but she couldn't leave her desk and spend the day searching Mason & Archer's acres of carpets. Scarcely a second passed without the flop of money carriers into the baskets at her elbow, and she had to deal with them all single-handed. There would be unutterable confusion if she abandoned her post to go treasure-hunting.

"What shall I do if I find it?" she asked, shooting somebody's change down the proper tube with a clank and a hiss of compressed air. She knew perfectly well that there was no chance whatever of this happening, but she was

FRESH IDEAS

glad to have the opportunity to talk to Mr. Unwin, whose commonplace and rather insignificant figure loomed altogether heroic and desirable to her short-sighted eyes.

"Bring it to me and I'll see that you get the reward," was the reply, and the shopwalker departed to pass on the news to the haberdashery counter. To everyone he gave the same instructions—that the pearl was to be brought to him. Mr. Learoyd's precious card was safe in his pocket, which meant that no one else could get the reward except through him. He smiled and rubbed his hands at the thought of the profit he was bound to make. If he found the pearl himself, and his chances were good, for he alone knew the careless jeweller's exact route through the vast shop, then he stood to gain thirty-five pounds. If anybody else found it, then his profits would be diminished, but by five pounds only, thanks to his smartness in altering the values for publicity purposes. Half an hour later he had another brilliant idea, which he put into practice during the dinner hour. He slipped round to the bank and returned with a crisp, new five-pound note in his pocket. Nothing like being prepared for eventualities.

The afternoon dragged on and still there was no sign of the missing pearl. In all departments there was hurry and bustle, and the minimum of work was done. Every square inch of carpet

THE RAY OF DOOM

passed in review before treasure-hunting eyes. Hundreds of pounds worth of stock was moved, opened, unfolded or unwrapped. All to no purpose.

At last, about half an hour before closing time, when Mr. Unwin had almost resigned himself to another day of suspense on the morrow, a lady who was making some small purchase in the gent.'s hosiery department bent down and picked up something from the floor.

"What's this?" she said, holding it up to the light. "Oh, it's only a bead." She was about to drop it when the assistant stopped her.

"We've been looking for that, madam. A gentleman lost it this morning. Wherever did you find it? I'm sure I've looked for it till my eyes ached."

"Just under the edge of the carpet," was the reply. "I felt it with my foot and wondered what it was."

"Will you wait a moment, madam?" The assistant rushed off in search of Mr. Unwin, who arrived rather breathless and in a state of great excitement, which he was endeavouring to conceal.

He looked at the little object in the lady's palm and his eyes glinted at the thought of the reward.

"That is probably what the gentleman lost, madam," he said. "I have his address and

FRESH IDEAS

shall be pleased to return it to him if it will save you any trouble."

"Thanks very much," replied the lady. "It would save me a journey. The only thing is," she continued pensively, "it may be valuable and there might be a reward offered." She opened her handbag as she spoke.

Mr. Unwin's heart missed a beat. Was she going to put the precious pearl away? Then he recovered himself. Nobody else knew the address of the owner, so the restoration would have to be carried out through him. He played his trump card to make certainty still more certain.

"There is a reward," he put in hastily. "Five pounds has been offered. In fact, to oblige the gentleman who lost it, who is a customer of ours, I could pay it to you now and recover it from him later. He particularly asked me to look after it for him when it was found, and I feel rather responsible."

Mr. Unwin dived his hand into his pocket and brought out his five-pound note, blessing his forethought as he did so.

"Here you are, madam," he said. "Cash transaction. No cheques accepted." He laughed to show that this was a joke. The lady hesitated.

"But I don't like taking it from you," she replied. "It doesn't seem fair. Wouldn't it be better if you gave me the address?"

THE RAY OF DOOM

"Not the least trouble, madam," Mr. Unwin assured her. He was intensely anxious to get that pearl into his own possession. "In any case Mr. Learoyd will repay me to-night. It is only a loan for a couple of hours."

"Oh, well, thanks very much. If you don't mind I don't."

The pearl and the note changed hands and Mr. Unwin breathed again as he showed the lady out. He was standing just inside the door examining his prize with rapt attention when the assistant approached.

"I say, Mr. Unwin, what about my share of the reward?"

"Your share? You didn't find it."

"No, but it was found at my counter and I fetched you."

"Can't help that. You didn't find it so you don't get anything. I didn't find it so I don't get anything. We're both in the same boat. You ought to have looked for it harder. Now get back to your work and don't waste any more time. There's been enough time wasted to-day, and all for nothing."

The assistant turned away sulkily and Mr. Unwin resumed his contemplation of the pearl. What a good thing he'd had the sense to get that five pounds out of the bank. If he hadn't been able to pay out the finder he couldn't very well have done anything else but give her the address, and then—he shuddered at the

FRESH IDEAS

thought of that thirty pounds going into somebody else's pocket.

Time dragged on leaden feet that evening. It seemed that eight o'clock would never come. At twenty minutes to, Mr. Unwin left his lodgings, boarded a tram-car and began the two mile ride to the address on his precious visiting card. The clock was striking eight as he knocked at the front door.

There was no answer. He knocked again, louder this time. A window on the first floor was flung open and a voice shouted:

"What jer want?" It was a nasty, bad-tempered voice, evidently not that of a person anxiously expecting the return of valuable lost property.

"Is Mr. Learoyd at home?"

"No, he isn't, and never was. There's nobody of that name lives here and never has done. And if any more of you comes asking for him I shall set the police on to you. What's the game, eh? D'you think it's the first of April?"

Mr. Unwin was dumbfounded. Perhaps he'd got the wrong number? He took Mr. Learoyd's card out of his pocket and looked at it again. No, it was the right house.

"Get out of it!" roared the voice of the irate individual upstairs. "You're the sixth person who's been here to-night asking for Mr. Learoyd, and I tell you we've never heard of

THE RAY OF DOOM

him. I'm about fed up with it." There was a crash as the window was slammed down. Negotiations were obviously at an end.

Mr. Unwin went slowly down the steps wondering what to do next. Once again he looked at the card. The jeweller must have made a mistake in the name of the street. A bowler-hatted man got off a passing bus and came across the road.

"Excuse me, sir," he began, "can you tell me if Mr. Learoyd lives here?"

Mr. Unwin gasped with surprise. "No, he certainly doesn't," he replied. "I've just been asking for him and they were most annoyed about it."

"That's funny," said the other. "He told me to be here at eight o'clock."

A horrible thought struck Mr. Unwin. What was it the man at the window had said? "You're the sixth person . . ." And here was the seventh!

"May I ask," he began in a strangled voice, "why you want to see him?"

"Oh, he lost something this morning in our shop and I'm bringing it back for him. One of the customers found it this afternoon."

"Was it a pearl?" croaked Mr. Unwin, running his finger round inside his collar, which appeared to have suddenly shrunk.

FRESH IDEAS

"Yes," was the astonished reply. "How did you guess that?"

Mr. Unwin took a small box from the inside pocket of his waistcoat and savagely ripped off the lid. Then he flung it on the ground and jumped on it. With piercing clarity of vision he saw the whole scheme, saw it to the uttermost farthing, but too late.

"How did I guess it?" he groaned bitterly. "Because he lost one at our place too. That's how I guessed it. I'm the sixth mug he's caught to-day and you're the seventh. I suppose that's his wife who goes round collecting the money. How much did she get out of you?"

"Five pounds. But do you mean to say——"

"I mean to say," snapped Mr. Unwin, "that we've been had."

"Had?" There was a dazed look on the other man's face.

"Yes. Diddled, swindled, robbed—damn it, man, can't you understand plain English?" Mr. Unwin's voice rose to a shout as the full beauty of Mr. Learoyd's artistry dawned upon him and he realised the infernal cleverness of it.

* * * * *

Mr. and Mrs. Learoyd—which, by the way, was not their name—were at this moment

THE RAY OF DOOM

sitting down to supper many miles away. The former had discarded his spectacles and his face was still slightly sore from the spirit gum which had supported a very skilfully made moustache, part of his identity as the jeweller from the North.

"It's easy money, old lass," he said, pushing back his plate and undoing the bottom buttons of his waistcoat. "You didn't have any trouble, did you?"

"Not a bit. That's the beauty of it. I must say, Frank, I give you full marks for your idea. It's practically impossible for it to go wrong, because you're not asking them for money either directly or indirectly. There's nothing to make them suspicious. All you do is to dig the pit and their own greed pushes them into it. They were falling over themselves to give me the money. If I pretended I didn't want to take it it simply made them all the more anxious to give it to me."

"Yes. There are a lot of dishonest people in the world, aren't there?"

"Only two out of nine were straight enough to give me the address without trying to make a bit out of it—those were dead losses, blast them!"

"How much have we made, exactly?"

Mrs. Learoyd pulled out a wad of notes and counted them.

"Thirty-two pounds," she announced at

FRESH IDEAS

length. "Six of them at five pounds a head and one at two pounds."

"Stingy devil," commented her husband. "He deserved to lose more than that."

"Yes, and the worst of it was I couldn't tell him so."

"Still, thirty-two pounds in one day isn't so bad."

"It's not all clear profit, remember. There's the cost of the pearls."

"Oh, yes. That was fifteen bob for the whole string. How much of it have we used?"

"About a shillingsworth. And sixpennorth of visiting cards."

"Oh, well, the expenses are pretty moderate then. Besides, we can keep the rest and they may come in some other time when we're short of money again." Mr. Learoyd took up the bundle of notes, tossed two of them to his wife and pocketed the remainder. "I'll get along to Bill Hirst's now and pay him. I promised it for to-night."

"I wish you'd spare a bit for some new curtains, Frank."

"I can't just now. I must get Bill started on those condensers."

"You're always spending money on your beastly apparatus."

"This'll be the last time. If you only wait a bit you'll have all the money you want."

THE RAY OF DOOM

"You've been saying that for a long time, and look what's happened. We don't know where the next penny's coming from unless we go out and swindle people for it."

"Oh, but, my dear, this time I really mean it. It won't be long, either. And I had to have this money to get the working model finished."

"Do you really think your machine's any good, Frank?"

"Good? Yes, more than good. It's the biggest thing of the century; I mean it. And I know what I'm talking about."

"But you've pottered about so long, and it's never done anything so far."

"No, but it's nearly finished now. You can't expect results all in a minute. I've been working at it on and off for twenty years—I've lived for it, I've dreamed of it, I've nearly starved for it." Mr. Learoyd's voice rose to a shout. "Why? Because I knew I was working on the right lines. And then to be held up at the last minute just because I hadn't got enough money—I think I should have gone mad if I hadn't thought of this pearl business."

* * * * *

That evening the electric motor in Hirst's garage was working even later than usual. Bill, stimulated by the unprecedented sum of thirty pounds, paid in advance, seemed to have

FRESH IDEAS

abandoned the idea of bed altogether. Far into the night he worked, watched eagerly by Mr. Playfair, who smoked endless cigarettes as the thin shavings of bronze curled off the cutting tool of the lathe. From time to time Mr. Playfair dabbed his upper lip with his handkerchief, as though it was slightly sore, as indeed it was.

CHAPTER III

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

BIG Ben was striking five as Inspector Drury left Scotland Yard and turned into the Strand. As usual on these occasions buses bearing every number but the right one were in sight, so Drury halted opposite the door of a Lyons teashop and began to fill his pipe while waiting.

At this moment the door opened and a man came out. A large, red-faced man with constabulary written all over him in spite of his plain clothes.

"Why, hallo, Drury!" he exclaimed.

The inspector, whose attention was wholly occupied by an attempt to shield the flame of a match from the wind, dropped the still burning fragment of wood and looked up.

"Farmer!" he cried in surprise, and shook hands. "What are you doing in London?"

"Day trip," was the reply. "I've been on my feet sixteen hours, and I've just been having a cup of coffee that I didn't want so that I could sit down a bit. I've still got two and a half hours before my train goes," he added despondently, looking at his watch.

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

"Come along home with me, then, and wait in comfort."

"Thanks very much."

And so Drury caught his bus in company with Sergeant Jackson of the Yorkshire (West Riding) Police, usually known as "Farmer" because of his rubicund face and generally bucolic appearance.

Years before, when Drury was a uniformed constable, he had served in the same force as Jackson, but the two had lost sight of each other after Drury's transfer to London. Farmer, unlike the inspector, was an easygoing man and completely lacking in ambition. Service in a country district suited him very well, and he had no desire to exchange his cottage and allotment for a terrace house in a paved street. He preferred his beat to be lit by the moon rather than by half-watt lamps; to be flanked by trees rather than tramway standards, and who shall say that he was wrong?

He sank down into an arm-chair in Drury's sitting-room with a sigh of relief.

"Do you mind if I take my boots off?" he began. "I feel as if I had two feet in each of them. No more day trips for me. Too much like hard work. Thanks." He caught the pair of slippers which Drury threw across the hearth-rug.

"How are things getting on at Osmondthorne?" asked the inspector. "It seems a

THE RAY OF DOOM

long time since I was in Yorkshire, except for short visits on business."

"Much the same as usual. We don't get any crime to speak of—not what you'd call crime, anyway."

"I know," replied Drury, "I remember when I was stationed there the sergeant told me there was a detective job for me—that was after about three months routine work—and I was as pleased as a cat with two tails. Saw myself doing wonderful feats of deduction and being promoted to Chief Constable in about a fortnight. And do you know what it was?"

"No. Something pretty dull, I should think."

"It was. Somebody had stolen a sheep, and my job was to go round to the village school and ask the teachers to find out who'd been having mutton for dinner!"

Farmer Jackson laughed.

"That's about our limit in Sherlock Holmes stuff," he admitted.

"Still," said Drury, "it worked all right, and you can't ask for more than that. It's a sound method, even if it is a bit simpler than the average detective story. How's old Dr. Brown getting on?" he continued. This was the drunken old police surgeon, whose eccentricities were almost legendary in Osmondthorne.

"Still the same as ever," was the reply. "The whisky isn't made that's strong enough to kill him. He doesn't look a day older, and

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

he must be well over seventy now. I should think he's the only doctor left in the country who still drives a horse."

"He's a wise man to stick to it. It can take him home when necessary, and that's more than a car can do."

"He did try a car a few years ago," said Jackson, "but it didn't last long. He was going home one night when he saw two lamps in front of him. He steered in between them beautifully, considering how drunk he was, only the trouble was that they weren't two bicycles at all but the side lamps of a cart! He was in bed for a couple of months after that, and when he started work again he went back to his horses. But that's not his latest. There was an inquest on a three-month-old baby a while since, and when the coroner asked him if he knew the child he said: "Yes, sir, I have attended it for the last two years."

"He was good at his work, though, when he was sober." Drury was mentally contrasting the lovable, pathetic old drunkard with the passionless, inhumanly efficient experts with whom it was now his lot to deal, and it seemed for a moment that much of the charm had gone out of life since he abandoned the peaceful torpidity of a country beat. For a moment he almost envied the sergeant, contentedly anchored in his placid backwater. The silence was broken by a reminiscent chuckle from Jackson.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"Do you remember old Sergeant Briggs?"

"I should think I do."

"He was a right sergeant. He could sup five or six pints without knowing he'd had owt! He liked prowling about at nights, too."

"I know, and we often wondered why, when he hadn't got to do it."

"He told me why after he retired. It was that chap who kept the poultry farm in Green Lane. He used to go out every night to lock up his hens—at least that's what he told his wife—and he'd go across the road to visit a lady who lived opposite. Old Briggs got to know about this, and he'd arrange to be passing just at the right time. That used to be worth half a crown to him about twice a week. No threats or blackmail or dirty work of that sort, of course. It was just to keep in with the sergeant—and old Briggs wasn't going to object. Besides, it got him no end of a reputation for zeal, doing night duty so often."

"One of the advantages of living in the country," said Drury. "He couldn't have done that in London. It's only in little places where everybody knows everybody else that people have such touchy consciences. Chaps like you can come up to London and do what they like without being recognised."

"I don't know so much about that. What about meeting you to-day? And the only

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

other time I've been here—did I tell you about it?"

"No."

"I had to fetch a prisoner and it was too late to get back that day, so I stopped the night. Well, I wanted to see something of London because I had to be off by the nine-fifteen train, so I got up early and went along to Covent Garden about five o'clock. It struck me that it would be about the only place where there'd be anything going off at that time in the morning. I went up to a policeman and asked him what time the pubs opened, and he said: 'They're open now.' So I went in to have a pint, and as soon as the barmaid saw me she said, 'Why, it's Bobby Jackson through Osmondthorne!' He, she wor pleased. I had two pints and it didn't cost me a penny. She'd been barmaid at Osmondthorne for four years, and then—to drop across her like that at five o'clock in the morning in a Covent Garden pub! Shows how you've got to be careful, doesn't it?"

Drury looked at his watch and went across to the wireless.

"Just in time to hear the news bulletin," he remarked, as he switched on.

Sure enough in a few seconds came the voice of the announcer. "Here is the weather forecast for to-night and to-morrow. A deep depression over the Atlantic is moving north-east, and fair weather will give way to unsettled

THE RAY OF DOOM

conditions. The first general news bulletin. Copyright by Reuter, Press Association, Exchange Telegraph and Central News——”

“Good evening, everybody,” cut in another speaker, a rough, harsh and uncultured voice this time, obviously not that of an announcer. “I am sorry to interrupt the programme, but I have a statement of great importance to make, one which will be, I venture to think, of more interest to you than the fat stock prices and the New York Stock Market report. It is The Liberator speaking. Remember that—The Liberator. One who is about to liberate humanity from an age-old fear, to free the world from an immemorial menace. The name will be unfamiliar to you, but it will not remain so. You may expect to hear a lot more about it during the next few days.

“To relieve your curiosity I will say at once that I have at my command a series of hitherto undiscovered vibrations in the ether. These waves possess very remarkable properties. As this announcement is going to affect the life and welfare of every living being on the face of the earth—and this is the literal truth—it may be as well to explain it in some detail.

“It has been known for many years that light is simply a form of wave or ripple in the ether, that invisible, imponderable something which is assumed by scientists to fill the whole of space, and which acts as a medium for the transmission

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

of these waves or ripples. Sir Isaac Newton in 1672 described the band of colours into which white light is split by a glass prism, and called it the ‘spectrum.’ You have all seen this band of colours in the prisms of an old-fashioned chandelier, or in the bevelled edge of a mirror or in a rainbow. It was afterwards discovered that the visible spectrum was not, as it seemed, complete in itself, and new methods of investigation extended it at both ends.

“Below the ‘red’ end of the visible spectrum come infra-red or heat rays, which are vibrations in the ether of exactly the same nature as light, but with a greater wave length, which accounts for their different properties. Below these again comes a broad band of Hertzian or wireless waves, again with different lengths and different properties. Beyond the other end of the spectrum it was found that ultra-violet rays existed. These, though invisible to the eye, can be detected by photography. Above these again are X-rays and the gamma rays of radium.

“The lengths of these waves vary enormously. The gamma rays are inconceivably short—about one forty million millionth of an inch—while the wireless waves at the other end of the scale may have a length of several thousand miles.

“If we range our series of waves side by side like the keys of a piano we find that the rays visible to the eye cover about one octave,

THE RAY OF DOOM

whereas the whole keyboard extends to no less than seventy octaves. Approximately five octaves of this vast scale are still unknown and undiscovered—that at least is the general opinion of modern science.

“But that opinion is not strictly correct. I have devoted many years to this problem of the unexplored territories of the spectrum, and have recently succeeded in identifying and producing two more octaves. Rays which have never previously been generated are now at my disposal, and are about to be used by me to accomplish the most ambitious feat ever attempted in the history of science—nay, in the history of the world.

“Big words, you say, and rightly. But they can and shall be proved up to the hilt. Firstly, my knowledge of ether rays is well demonstrated by this talk, which in itself forms a partial proof of my claims. What other man living could drown the programmes of the British Broadcasting Corporation without permission in order to announce his own message to the world? One octave of my rays is doing that at the moment. But it is the other octave which is the important one.

“To return to our spectrum for a moment. As I have already mentioned, different rays have different properties. To give examples suitable for my present purpose—heat or infra-red rays have a definite lethal effect on micro-

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

organisms—bacteria, disease germs, call them what you will. The surgeon makes use of this property when he sterilises his instruments and dressings by heat. Again, ultra-violet rays have a somewhat similar effect, and have indeed been used commercially for the sterilisation of water supplies.

“It is not altogether surprising then to find that some of my newly discovered rays have the same sort of action. But, and this is the important point, it is a far more powerful one—almost incredibly so. And, more surprising still, this extremely potent agent is highly selective. That is to say, it appears to be harmless to ordinary animal or vegetable life, but its effect on the lowest forms of life, that is, on single-celled animals and plants, is absolutely devastating. Like the Death Ray of fiction it blasts them out of life into death almost instantaneously. And it is this very group of single-celled living creatures from which are recruited all the vast army of disease germs, the main enemies of mankind, the Captains of the Men of Death.

“My first successful apparatus was naturally a small and feeble affair, worked by a flash-lump battery, as a matter of fact, and carried in a case the size of a box of cigarettes, but it produced results which amazed even me, who had some idea of the deadliness of the forces which I was bringing into the world.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"I tested it on living cultures of bacteria, freshly obtained from a hospital laboratory and known to be alive and virulent. Less than half a second's exposure at a range of four hundred yards was enough to kill every one of them. And this with a flash-lamp battery! On the other hand it had not the slightest effect, even at close range and with prolonged exposures, on insects, small animals such as mice, and ordinary plants. The next step in my campaign, as an absolute proof that I am speaking the truth, is that to-night I shall exterminate all micro-organisms in St. Martha's Hospital. All I shall do is to touch a switch in my attaché case, somewhere within a radius of quarter of a mile from the hospital. I may be in the street, in a taxi, on a bus, in the Underground, sitting or standing next to any one of you—it matters not where I am. Ether waves penetrate everywhere, as indoor aërials prove.

"A more powerful machine is under construction and in a very short time I shall free the whole earth from the domination of disease. That is why I call myself The Liberator. Ever since bacteria were first discovered scientists have been looking for some effective agent which would kill them without damaging the individual who is unfortunate enough to harbour them. This quest has never had very successful results, but at last the solution to the problem has been

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

found, and it is not merely a new disinfectant which has to be applied to each and every individual case. Even this would be a magnificent step forward, but my discovery is more far-reaching still. It is a sword which will strike at a distance, a shield which can be stretched over the whole of mankind.

"Judging by the utterly unexpected power of my first puny outfit, half a dozen of my machines operated by comparatively small engines and run simultaneously for a time in the different continents of the world, would free the whole planet once and for all from bacterial life of every sort. I hope to be ready to try this experiment very shortly. If it fails for want of sufficient power, which is unlikely, then I may have to enlist the help of others to carry out my project. Imagine the almost illimitable power of Niagara Falls, through its vast generating station, turned for a time on to the Conquest of Disease! It is an epic conception.

"But at present I propose to continue the work myself. Mine has been the pioneer's lot—hard work, expense, no recompense, no recognition, poverty. Poverty of such degree that the work itself has been delayed and imperilled for want of money. Mine shall be the glory of success. Mine shall be the renown and enduring fame, greater than that earned by any other man who ever lived. Generations yet unborn, freed at one stroke from half the

THE RAY OF DOOM

diseases which afflict the human body, which cause and have caused for thousands of years most of the misery and suffering of this life, shall hail The Liberator as the world's greatest benefactor. And—I am The Liberator!

"Ladies and gentlemen, I apologise for speaking at such length, for interrupting your entertainment and for invading the sacred provinces of the B.B.C., but you will understand that the matter is of vital importance to each one and every one of you. To-morrow morning will prove that I speak the truth. Good night."

The voice ceased speaking and there was a moment's silence, broken only by the faint hum of the mains receiving set.

"What do you think of that?" said Drury, who had let his pipe go out during the amazing speech of the mysterious Liberator.

Farmer Jackson wagged his head slowly from side to side, like a large cart-horse.

"Don't know," he said stolidly. "One of your London leg pulls, I suppose. I prefer the North Regional programme myself."

"Yes, that must be it. Do you remember somebody once gave a realistic account of an imaginary revolution in London, and lots of people who tuned in in the middle thought it was genuine news and got the wind up about it? Still," Drury paused as a sudden thought struck him. "This can't be the same sort of

THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS

thing. We heard the whole of it from start to finish——"

The wireless burst into life again.

"We must apologise, ladies and gentlemen, for this unprecedented interruption of the programme," said a beautifully modulated voice. Obviously the announcer was back again. He appeared from his intonation to be somewhat shaken from the Olympic imperturbability which is characteristic of all announcers.

"Owing to a slight technical hitch——"

"Good old B.B.C.," put in Drury. "If the Last Trump interrupted the programme they'd call it a technical hitch!"

"Some amateur transmitting station of unusual and unauthorised power appears to have encroached upon our wave length. Steps will at once be taken to ensure that no such interference occurs again. To continue with the New York Stock Market report. To-day's opening of the market was easy. Sentiment, however, is dominated by developments at Washington. Prices again tended to stiffen in the afternoon. Sterling selling in New York moved fractionally higher——"

There was a click as Drury shut off the switch.

"Well, I suppose we shall hear all about it in the papers to-morrow. Funny thing to happen though. I suppose the B.B.C. is right, and some amateur has found out how to butt

THE RAY OF DOOM

in on the programme and is doing a bit of spoofing. It'll make the wireless officials gibber a bit, won't it!"

Farmer Jackson was putting on his boots again.

"'Bout time I was off," he said. "Just got nice time to catch the train. You stick to the North Regional programme in future, Drury. It doesn't do these funny stunts."

CHAPTER IV

COINCIDENCE OR . . . ?

SIR JAMES MARTIN, that eminent pathologist, was rather annoyed when he arrived at his laboratory in St. Martha's Hospital the next morning. This was unusual, because he was not easily disturbed.

In the first place he had overslept himself, which is always a bad start to a day's work. Because of this he had eaten his breakfast in such a hurry that it lay like a solid lump under his waistcoat. Moreover there had been no time to read the morning paper, so he was subjected to another irritation during his tube journey. Everyone was talking about somebody or something called The Liberator, and, as he had not used his wireless the previous evening, he had not the remotest idea what they meant.

Everywhere newspaper placards were full of mystifying statements—"Who is The Liberator?" "National Hoax by B.B.C.," "Full Report of the Speech—Exclusive," "The Spectrum Explained," "St. Martha's—The Crucial Test," "Hoax or World Deliverance?" Sir James could not understand it at all.

THE RAY OF DOOM

Even when he arrived at St. Martha's everything appeared to be abnormal. Little groups of people were standing round the gates talking excitedly. The out-patient porter was engaged in heated argument with half a dozen men armed with pencils and notebooks.

"No, you can't see the Dean," he expostulated. "I don't care if you are the Press. Stand back, gentlemen, please, and let these patients come in."

Sir James left him to it and went on to his own room. He changed into his white coat, took the dust cover off his microscope and rang for the laboratory attendant.

"Fetch me those sub-cultures from the nursing home case, George, will you?"

"Yes, sir." George disappeared into the next room and there was the sound of an incubator door opening and shutting. In a moment he returned with a small rack of test tubes in one hand and a couple of Petri dishes in the other.

"They don't seem to have grown very well, sir," said George doubtfully, as he deposited his burden on the bench.

This was true. The agar surfaces of the dishes, instead of being covered with a growth of micro-organisms so copious as to be visible to the naked eye, were blank. The liquid in the tubes, instead of being turbid with teeming legions of microscopic life, was as bright

COINCIDENCE OR . . . ?

and clear as it had been the previous evening.

"What's happened?" snapped Sir James. "Something wrong with the incubator?"

"No, sir."

"Well, then, you've made a mess of the medium."

"No, sir. It can't be that. It's from the same batch that you've been using for the last week. We don't start on the new lot till to-morrow. Anyway, the new lot's all right, too, sir." George had been preparing bacteriological media for over twenty years, and was naturally pained at Sir James's lack of faith. More likely, thought he, that Sir James himself had made an error in technique.

"Perhaps it's The Liberator, sir," he suggested with a half-smile. The omens were not propitious for attempts at humour, but George was a privileged person. He was almost an institution, a very encyclopædia of minor bacteriological methods, and a first rate laboratory organiser. In case of doubt ask George, was the motto of St. Martha's pathological department.

"And who the devil is The Liberator?" asked Sir James slowly and distinctly.

George explained, as much as he knew—as much as anybody knew.

"Do you really believe all this rubbish?" demanded the pathologist, when George's résumé—a good and intelligent one—was complete.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"No, sir."

"Of course you don't. Nor do I. But we've got to find out what's happened to those cultures. They want the report by to-morrow. Have another look at the incubator and make certain it's working all right, and then check the reaction of the agar. I'll make some fresh cultures as soon as you've done it."

"Right, sir." George disappeared on his errand of investigation like a terrier after a rat. He took a very real pride in his work, and any untoward event such as this roused in him all the enthusiasm of the craftsman. He would never rest, and would never allow the laboratory staff to rest, until the mystery was thoroughly explored and explained. Such a blot could not be permitted to stain the escutcheon of George the infallible, the super-efficient. Why, the lab. boys and even the house physicians (the order of precedence is George's) would be accusing him of making dud culture media if the news leaked out. It was unthinkable, intolerable.

Half an hour later the telephone bell rang, and Sir James took up the instrument with a frown. Was he never to be allowed to work in peace on this disastrous morning?

"That you, Martin?"

"Yes." Rather grumpily.

"Carruthers speaking." Sir Yardley Carruthers was senior physician at St. Martha's.

COINCIDENCE OR . . . ?

"Have you had any trouble in your department to-day?"

"Trouble? What sort of trouble?"

"Any cultures dead? That sort of trouble."

"Well," replied Sir James slowly, "it's rather funny that you should ask that. As a matter of fact we have. At least, I don't know that any are dead, but there's one lot which are either dead or dormant. They haven't grown when they ought to have done. But I don't know the reason yet. Probably there's something wrong with the hydrogen ion concentration of the media." By this Sir James meant that the media might be too acid or too alkaline to suit the tastes of his cultures. "Why do you want to know?"

"Will you come over to Ward 6 and I'll tell you all about it? Got an interesting case for you to see, too."

"All right."

When the pathologist arrived at Ward 6 he found Sir Yardley there in company with his house physician and a group of students.

The senior physician of St. Martha's was one of the most up-to-date men in London. His brain was acutely receptive of new ideas, and advancing years had in no way dulled his ambition to be constantly in the van of progress. If he had a fault he was, if anything, too eager to accept new methods—or at any rate rather too credulous about them and apt to over-

THE RAY OF DOOM

estimate their value. Still, a good fault for an old man.

"Did you hear The Liberator last night?" was his first question.

"I did not." Sir James was rather tired of The Liberator.

"I did, and I must say it rather impressed me." Here Sir James saw the house physician wink at one of the senior students. He agreed with the unspoken comment, disrespectful though it was. Stuff like that was exactly the sort of thing which would appeal to Sir Yardley.

"The man, whoever he was, sounded intensely sincere. Egotistical no doubt, but with a great belief in himself. And he did succeed in getting his message through without permission, so he must know more about wireless waves than most people. That's a definite fact, at any rate. The B.B.C. admit it. It's in all the papers this morning."

Sir James stifled a yawn. Why didn't Sir Yardley come to the point? Physicians do not—or should not—invite pathologists into their wards in order to talk over last night's broadcasting. Sir Yardley made a move towards the far end of the ward.

"There is a most extraordinary case here, Martin, which I would like you to see." Ah, now he was coming to it. The two men stopped by the end bed, and the students grouped themselves round, three deep.

COINCIDENCE OR . . . ?

"Here is a young lady," began Sir Yardley, smiling at the patient, who returned his greeting cheerfully, "who was dying yesterday. I know one does not, as a rule, say things like that in front of a patient, but it doesn't matter in this case because as you can see she is very much alive to-day. She has—or had—infective endocarditis, with a positive blood culture, and had been getting steadily worse for several weeks. I do not need to remind you, gentlemen"—this to the students—"that the condition is always fatal. During the night, however, this girl underwent a remarkable, a miraculous change. As you see from her chart her temperature and pulse rate dropped to normal for the first time for a month. Her general condition is immeasurably improved. The sweating and the rigors have stopped and her mental condition is as clear as yours or mine—free from the constant drowsy delirium which has been growing worse for the last fortnight, and which was an ominous index of the severity of the living poison in her blood stream.

"This girl, gentlemen, has had everything possible done for her—intravenous injections of various antiseptics, which ought to kill the germs in the blood but don't, a vaccine which has been prepared from her own organisms and administered—excellent in theory but useless in practice. All treatment is futile in these cases, but one always wants to keep on trying.

THE RAY OF DOOM

I have never seen or heard of improvement in such a severe case. I do not flatter myself that my treatment has worked this wonder, and I am sure Mr. Jessop will not claim the credit for it"—Mr. Jessop was the house physician. "What then is the explanation? Are we to suppose that The Liberator's preposterous nonsense is really true? Gentlemen, I believe we are. It appears to be the only solution. Sir James here has some slight confirmatory evidence, I think."

The pathologist was interested, in spite of himself. The thing was beyond all reason, but—here were two separate and distinct incidents which were totally inexplicable unless Sir Yardley's wild theory were true. In response to a gesture from the physician Sir James explained what had happened in the laboratory that morning.

"The matter can soon be settled," he concluded. "We can't tell by looking at our cultures whether they are dead or alive, but all we have to do is to make fresh cultures from them and incubate. If they are alive they'll grow, if not they won't. While we are about it we had better test the other cultures we have in stock. This would have been done to-day anyhow for some of them, as a matter of routine work. Also we can make fresh cultures from this young lady and see if there is any alteration in the condition of her infection."

COINCIDENCE OR . . . ?

"Until then the matter is *sub judice*," said Sir Yardley. "Well, what is it, Mr. Pearson?"

Mr. Pearson was a stately, morning-coated gentleman who had just entered the ward. He was the Clerk to the Governors, in effect the executive head of the hospital. He had all the prestige of the permanent official in his dealings with the senior staff, all the suavity required to avoid friction with the rapidly changing generations of young house surgeons—a notoriously touchy and dignified race—and all the authority required to cope with the lay employees, over whom he had direct control. In short he was the hospital. He was very rarely seen in the wards.

"The place is infested with reporters, Sir Yardley," he said. "We cannot get rid of them, so I thought it best to ask you if you could make any statement for the Press. They seem to have some ridiculous idea . . ."

"I wonder if it is ridiculous," mused Sir Yardley thoughtfully. "We can't say much at present, Mr. Pearson. If you like you can tell them that two incidents have occurred which are difficult to explain, and which seem to support the rumours that are being circulated. But nothing is certain yet, and it will be impossible to give any opinion before this evening."

CHAPTER V

FIRSTFRUITS

EXTRACT from leading article of the *Daily Wire*, which, contrary to their usual custom, is "splashed" across the front page. This afterwards led to a complicated lawsuit for breach of contract between the owners of the paper and the firm which had paid one thousand five hundred pounds for one day's exclusive use of the space in question. However, the *Daily Wire* sold over six million copies of this and the next day's issue, so a few hundred pounds damages were of no importance.

"The *Daily Wire* is able to print (see below) a full, verbatim and exclusive report of The Liberator's remarkable speech last night. It so happened that a shorthand student, while practising for an examination, was taking down the B.B.C.'s verbal programme. Consequently he obtained a word for word transcription, which the *Daily Wire* purchased from him for the highest figure ever paid to a free-lance journalist. No other paper contains more than a résumé of the speech—or at any rate the earlier part of it. Not until the importance and

FIRSTFRUITS

interest of the matter became manifest during the progress of the speech itself did anyone else trouble to take it down in writing.

"The *Daily Wire* is of the opinion that The Liberator, whoever he is, is not a practical joker. Presumptive evidence of his claim to special knowledge is afforded by the very fact of the speech itself being broadcast. But this is not all. Our Special Correspondent, on inquiry at St. Martha's Hospital this morning, elicited the information that certain significant incidents had occurred since last night. The full text of the official communiqué will be found in column four.

"This statement was issued by the Clerk to the Governors with the sanction of Sir Yardley Carruthers, the Harley Street specialist, and Sir James Martin, the Home Office pathologist. True, it is expressed in very guarded language, but evidence which even partly satisfies such authorities as these is probably almost conclusive to the ordinary person. The caution of the scientific mind is proverbial.

"Moreover, our Special Correspondent observed that intense activity prevailed in the pathological department"—George had earned ten shillings by telling him that—"and the fullest investigations are obviously being made. Sir Yardley Carruthers has arranged to return to the hospital this evening to learn the result of these tests and supervise their publication

THE RAY OF DOOM

if this is deemed desirable. It is rumoured on good authority"—George again—"that, in order to do this, he refused an extremely lucrative consultation in the provinces, which indicates the importance which he attaches to the events at the hospital.

"Great secrecy was preserved at St. Martha's, and it was not possible to obtain full details. It was noticed, however (by means of the name indicators in the office at the front door), that practically the whole of the visiting staff were present in the hospital this morning. It is very unusual for so many consultants to be on the premises at the same time.

"Our Special Correspondent managed to secure a few moments conversation with one of the students, who had been sent out to obtain some bacteriological cultures from another hospital. The student was reticent, but the impression gathered was that something startling had happened. Also, later in the morning Reuter's representative interviewed the parents of several patients. It appears to be beyond question from their stories that many patients who were on the danger list have made sudden and very unexpected recoveries. No less than six groups of relatives who were undergoing the sad ordeal of watching by the death beds of their loved ones, were overjoyed to find their vigil ended by the welcome news that they could go home and come again on visiting day.

FIRSTFRUITS

"All these facts taken together seem to indicate that The Liberator is making good his promise.

"Supposing this astounding news is true, what will be the result? Mankind will be in possession of a magnificently potent weapon in the fight against disease and death. If all disease germs are susceptible to the mysterious rays of The Liberator then his name is indeed well chosen. The death rate will fall enormously, epidemics will be controllable and abolished with perfect ease and there will be a vast reduction of pain, sickness and sorrow.

"Of course, it will not make man immortal or even wholly free from disease. There will still be an enormous amount of non-bacterial complaints, of surgical conditions requiring treatment, and of accidents. But the medical and dental professions will find much of their occupation gone, and hospitals and nursing homes will have empty beds in plenty.

"There may be, incidentally, many curious financial repercussions resulting from this beneficent discovery (always assuming that it is true). Makers of drugs and chemicals, particularly disinfectants, manufacturers of surgical and dental instruments and appliances will find their trade greatly reduced. Friendly societies should experience a large diminution in their disbursements for sick pay. Insurance companies will be able to lower their premiums

THE RAY OF DOOM

for life and endowment assurances. Payments to panel doctors, based on the present incidence of sickness, will be excessive under the new conditions and will need to be adjusted. National Health contributions will be proportionately lower. All pensions and compensation payments will necessarily be more costly owing to the increased length of the average life. For the same reason the price of annuities will rise. Actuaries will have a very busy time re-calculating those mysterious life tables which are the foundation stones of all insurance business.

"It is useless to speculate further on the probable results of this invention until its reality is established beyond question. All that can be said at the moment is that a *prima facie* case can be made out for a discovery which may change the whole of our outlook on life.

"One thing is certain. Unlike most of the marvels of modern science this particular manifestation of human control over natural forces can never be prostituted to evil or even harmful purposes. Generally speaking when a new benefit is conferred upon mankind, something which should make the world a better and happier place to live in, man's first impulse is to use it to slay his fellow men.

"The Liberator's secret can never be hurtful. As pointed out above, minor inconveniences

FIRSTFRUITS

may be caused to certain trades and professions, but the harm that may be done is trivial and utterly negligible when compared to the magnificence of the discovery itself and the almost infinite power for good which now seems to be within our grasp."

Most of the rest of the issue was taken up by photographs of the hospital, its history, biographies of the staff hastily compiled from the Medical Directory and the imagination of the sub-editors, and all the usual information which is raked up at these times. There were also many self-congratulatory references to the smartness of the *Daily Wire* in publishing the exclusive report of the speech. If the truth were told the smartness was wholly on the side of the shorthand student, who had the sense to realise the value of his manuscript, and who offered it to the *Daily Wire* solely because he thought—and rightly—that it was the most profitable market.

*Excerpt from the wireless programme
the same evening.*

"This is the National Programme from London. Good evening, everybody. It is the custom of the British Broadcasting Corporation to interpolate occasional unrehearsed items of special interest. Airmen who have flown the

THE RAY OF DOOM

Atlantic, motorists who have broken the world's speed record and other celebrities are sometimes captured and made to talk to you while their achievements are fresh in your memories. To-night Sir James Martin, the pathologist, is to tell you about certain epoch-making happenings at St. Martha's Hospital, London. Here is Sir James Martin."

There was a moment's pause and a muffled cough. A fresh voice began to speak.

"I will not waste time referring to last night's occurrence on the wireless, for I suppose there is nobody in the country who has not heard of The Liberator by this time, although he was unknown twenty-four hours ago. What I have to tell you this evening is that this unknown individual has definitely carried out his promise.

"He said that he would kill all micro-organisms in our hospital, and he has done it, impossible, incredible as it may seem. Of course, I do not mean that there are no living germs on the hospital premises at this moment—fresh ones are constantly drifting in with every puff of wind, with every speck of dust. Every person who enters will leave millions behind him. But what I do mean is this. Scores of glass tubes and containers of all kinds, filled with suitable food for germs and sealed or covered to prevent contamination, are constantly in our incubators. Germs of

FIRSTFRUITS

all kinds are perpetually being grown for various purposes. Six large incubators are kept working day and night all the year round.

"This morning one of these 'cultures,' as we call them, was apparently dead. There was no reason why it should be dead, and a laboratory is the last place in the world where unreasonable things are allowed to happen, so an exhaustive investigation was made to solve the mystery. I may say that our routine work has been sadly neglected to-day. Every available man, with the exception of one who was needed to carry on the more urgent pathological work of the hospital, was turned on to this problem. Every culture in the building was subcultured and incubated, and we find now at the end of twelve hours that there is no sign of growth in any one of them. No less than one hundred and seventy eight were examined, and at least one hundred and thirty of these should have shown signs of activity by now. The remainder grow more slowly—the tubercle bacillus for example takes about ten days to form a visible growth—and we shall have to suspend judgment upon these for the present.

"One hundred and sixteen of the hundred and thirty available have already been proved to be dead, and fresh results keep coming in by telephone while I am speaking. It may be argued that the conditions were unfavourable

THE RAY OF DOOM

to bacterial life—that something had gone wrong with the culture media—the food—upon which these organisms were sown. Naturally that was the first point to be settled. It was found that all the media—and there are many different kinds—were apparently normal, but the matter was not allowed to rest here. Absolute certainty was essential. It was attained in the following way.

“Take for instance the first of our series. This was a culture of an organism called the streptococcus, which, until last night was known to be healthy and vigorous. It grew readily in subculture, as is the habit of the streptococcus. A flat dish of agar—a kind of nutrient jelly much used for this purpose—was taken, and upon one half of its surface a minute quantity of the culture to be tested was spread with a sterilised platinum needle—far less than could be seen with the naked eye. On the other half of the same dish a similar invisibly small quantity of streptococci *obtained from another hospital* was spread. The whole was then incubated. At eight o'clock this evening the dish was examined. The control culture from the other hospital showed numerous small spots of growth, or colonies as we call them, visible with a lens; our culture on the other hand showed no growth at all, although it was sown on the same plate. This procedure was carried out throughout the

FIRSTFRUITS

series and the results have been remarkably consistent. As an additional test many of our organisms have been sown on media borrowed from other hospitals and known to be in good condition. All failed to grow. This proves that the fault lies with our bacteria and not with our media. A few more results have yet to come in, and I will at once inform you if there are any exceptions to this statement.

“The simple and surprising fact remains then that the majority of our cultures are definitely known to be dead. Now a culture is not composed of one or two germs, which might die accidentally, but of countless millions of individuals, and, given proper conditions, they never die off spontaneously.

“We can illustrate this by a simple analogy. Life is notoriously uncertain and no man knows when he will die. One, or conceivably two, individuals may die suddenly while watching a football match, but the crowd of fifty thousand, taken as a whole, will be alive at the end of the match. Nothing in the whole range of human experience is more certain than this. Something then has killed our cultures. Are we to suppose that someone has broken into the laboratory by night and destroyed them all by some process of sterilisation? This is conceivable in theory, but seems pointless, and is in fact, impossible. There is no sign that anything has been tampered with

THE RAY OF DOOM

or disturbed in any way. How is our imaginary lunatic going to carry out his task? The simplest way would be to heat all the cultures. This would kill them easily and quickly, but not without leaving traces. Solid media such as agar or gelatine would melt, and it would be obvious what had been done. Similarly all other ordinary methods would give themselves away. As an additional argument against this theory, certain cultures were temporarily stored in various places most unlikely to be found by such a nocturnal visitor. All, without exception, are dead."

Sir James then went on to describe the other evidences of The Liberator's activities. There were about a dozen startling and unprecedented recoveries of patients who were apparently dying of bacterial diseases, but he laid very little stress upon these. Being a laboratory worker by instinct and training, he attached little importance to anything which could not be proved by laboratory methods. While admitting that the cumulative evidence was strong he qualified this by emphasising the uncertainty of medical opinions. Even the most skilled observer may make mistakes in his forecast of the future of any given case, and all doctors have met with cases of unexpected recovery.

An advocate or a journalist would, of course, have placed this suggestive but incon-

FIRSTFRUITS

clusive testimony first, and then finished on a note of triumphant certainty with the laboratory evidence. Sir James was merely a man of science whose object was the truth, and his speech was of the nature of a judge's summing up rather than an oration for the defence. To him the evidence was all that mattered, and he cared not what conclusions were drawn from it by the lay public.

"Finally," he went on, "I personally am satisfied that outside interference such as was predicted last night is the only credible explanation of what has happened to-day in our laboratory." It is worthy of note that here he omitted the clinical or bedside evidence entirely. "Why the discoverer of these new rays has chosen to announce his success in such an extraordinary and reckless fashion is unknown. He has caused very grave inconvenience to many of us at St. Martha's. In some cases years of research work are completely ruined. But in spite of this he has brought into the world such a mighty weapon for the defence of humanity that on behalf of mankind I take it upon myself to say, 'Thank you, Liberator.'"

"All that now remains is for him to emerge from his anonymity and place his weapon in the hands of those who can try out its powers, learn how to use it and then employ it, not at random"—Sir James here spoke with a world of emotion in his voice. No doubt he was

THE RAY OF DOOM

thinking of his own beloved researches into the complement fixation reactions of the hæmolytic streptococci, brought to an abrupt close by the death of his cultures—"but systematically and efficiently in the prevention and treatment of disease."

"That concludes Sir James Martin's talk," said the announcer. "You will now hear dance music until midnight, broadcast by Michael and his band from the Trafalgar Hotel, London."

Letter from The Liberator to the Editor of the "Daily Wire."

"Dear Sir,

"The truth of my claims is now, I think, sufficiently demonstrated. With all due respect to Sir James Martin, however, and while thanking him for his kindly and sincere tribute to the value of my discovery, I must take exception to some of the remarks he made during his broadcast speech last night. His calm suggestion that my invention—*my* invention—should be handed over to 'those who can try out its powers' (presumably Sir James and his colleagues) would be laughable in its ingenuousness if it were not impertinent.

"Who is likely to know most about my new rays—myself, The Liberator, to whom all the pioneer work is solely due, or a parcel of medical

FIRSTFRUITS

men to whom the very idea was unknown until I brought it—somewhat dramatically—to their notice? Who is entitled to the credit which will result from the operation of my apparatus on a world-wide scale—myself or the medical profession? There can be only one answer. It is the creation of my brain and mine alone, and it shall remain my exclusive property. Nothing will stop me now. Criticism and disparagement there will be in plenty, but the cause is obvious—unworthy jealousy.

"Financial difficulties are now overcome and my plans for continuing the work on a large scale are rapidly approaching completion. It may interest the public to know that the money required was kindly—and unwittingly—supplied by the *Daily Wire*. The 'student of shorthand' who sold his manuscript for such a satisfactory sum was myself. It seemed the obvious thing to do. There was the draft of my speech, evidently of considerable value to the Press. Why not sell it? The *Daily Wire* will therefore have the double satisfaction of an exclusive journalistic 'scoop,' and the knowledge that they have enabled me to carry out my project of completely freeing the earth from its burden of bacterial life.

"I may add that it will be quite useless to attempt to trace me through this letter, which was written on a second-hand typewriter bought many years ago and since destroyed. Not until

THE RAY OF DOOM

my life-long ambition is realised will the world know the identity of

"The Liberator."

From the "Daily Wire."

SENSATIONAL INTERVIEW WITH
SIR JAMES MARTIN.

IS IT THE END?

By Our Special Correspondent.

"The eminent pathologist, interviewed in his laboratory to-day, not only confirmed the opinions which he expressed last night in his broadcast speech, but confessed that another very important point had arisen, which was omitted from his previous statement owing to the haste with which this was prepared.

"It appears that the bacterial cultures which were destroyed by The Liberator's mysterious Death Ray were not all composed of pathogenic or disease-producing germs.

"What is the importance of that, Sir James?' I inquired. The matter appeared to me to be of little significance.

"It is a very vital point,' replied Sir James seriously. "It proves that The Liberator's rays do not act on disease germs only, but probably on all bacteria, possibly even on all protozoa

FIRSTFRUITS

or single-celled creatures. Of course, this is only what one would expect. It is much easier to imagine rays fatal to all protozoa than rays fatal to a small group of them and harmless to the rest. After all, why should pathogenic bacteria be more sensitive to these rays than non-pathogenic bacteria?'

"I still don't see that it matters, Sir James,' I confessed. I was scarcely aware that any germs existed apart from those which caused diseases. I was speedily disillusioned.

"Amongst our stock of cultures which were killed,' went on the pathologist, 'were several harmless varieties kept for the use of students beginning the study of bacteriology. Until they have obtained a little experience it is hardly safe to allow them to handle the more dangerous species. Also there was a series of yeast cultures which were being investigated, and a rather unique range of agricultural organisms obtained from farm land. One of my colleagues had an idea that certain human diseases which were contracted from animals have their origin in the ordinary harmless bacteria found in all soils. He considered that, under certain conditions, they took upon themselves the power of causing disease. In order to test this theory he collected many strains of farm bacteria—admittedly harmless varieties. That is why they happen to be in a medical school laboratory, which does not usually deal

THE RAY OF DOOM

with agricultural problems. All of them are dead. The yeast cultures are dead. The students' bacteria are dead.'

" 'But what does that mean?'

" I should mention here that Sir James had had the opportunity of seeing a copy of the letter printed in our columns this morning, in which The Liberator avows his determination to carry out his plan in secret.

" 'It means, if this irresponsible inventor is allowed to have his way, universal and inevitable death!' Sir James laughed bitterly. 'The Liberator may know a lot about ether waves, but he evidently doesn't know much about bacteria. What does it mean indeed? It means the decay and dissolution of civilisation and the ultimate extinction of all life upon the earth.' "

CHAPTER VI

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

SITTING round the table in a large room in Downing Street was a group of elderly men. All governments are elderly. No man is permitted to rise to high office in political circles until the ideals and enthusiasms of youth have faded for ever, until his physical energies are on the wane, and until his body has lost its taut elastic beauty and his mind is hardened into an inflexible groove. This precaution is said to ensure wisdom and experience at the head of affairs. Its results may be seen in the dark and blood-stained pages of history, and in the graveyards of the world.

Bundles of papers and dispatch boxes were strewn over the polished surface of the table. Only the space at the end was clear, where sat Mr. Parker Herdman, the Prime Minister and First Lord of the Treasury. There was silence in the sunlit room as Mr. Herdman rose to his feet. Outside could be faintly heard the rush of London's never ceasing traffic.

"Gentlemen," he began. "The events at St. Martha's Hospital took place a fortnight ago.

THE RAY OF DOOM

Since then, as you are aware, The Liberator has given another demonstration of his powers by sterilising an area of a hundred square miles in the Midlands. Reports from hospitals in Birmingham and elsewhere are quite definite on this point. They unanimously agree that The Liberator did exactly what he promised to do in his latest letter to the papers—no more, no less. It seems, therefore, that he is likely to carry out his promises in full in the near future. If we are to believe his last letter, and up to the present he has always adhered strictly to the truth as far as can be ascertained, this second demonstration was performed with the same feeble instrument that he used in his early experiments, the only difference being that a longer exposure was given. He is of the opinion that a small and easily portable apparatus will sterilise a continent, given a suitable exposure to compensate for its lack of power. This seems absurd and incredible, but he adduces an analogy which is plausible enough. A photographic plate exposed through an astronomical telescope will show far more than can be seen by the eye through the same telescope, solely by virtue of the long exposure possible. If the object is below a certain standard of luminosity it is invisible to the eye, and no amount of staring at it will bring it into view, because the eye does not collect and store the light rays, but sees only those which

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

impinge upon it momentarily. The photographic plate, on the other hand, gathers up and accumulates the infinitesimal amounts of light which it receives and eventually shows an image of objects almost infinitely remote. Something like this occurs with the new rays. Bacteria are not only specially sensitive to them, but they also have the power of absorbing them in some way or other, with the result that a sub-lethal dose becomes poisonous if its application is continued long enough.

"To put it another way. Most poisonous drugs can be taken repeatedly in small doses without much harm resulting, because the body gets rid of them at such a rate that a fatal concentration is never reached. But there are exceptions to this. Lead, for instance, is a cumulative poison, and if taken in minute quantities for a sufficiently long time will eventually cause lead poisoning, the reason being that the body does not get rid of it fast enough.

"The Liberator draws our attention to yet another analogy which is even more apposite and convincing, since it refers to rays which are not unlike his own. The X-rays used in surgery cause no harm to a person who is exposed to them for a short time, but repeated exposures to even a moderate intensity of radiation will cause very serious damage. The early X-ray workers found this out to their

THE RAY OF DOOM

cost, and many were crippled and even killed by this cumulative effect before the need for protection was realised. The Liberator thinks that his rays have some such action on bacteria, and he is more than ever certain that he can, single handed or with a few assistants, carry out the stupendous task of sterilising the whole planet. In fact he has already worked out the exposures required for this purpose.

"Nothing will induce him to come forward and disclose either his identity or his invention. He takes no notice of offers or rewards and he ignores threats. All efforts to trace his whereabouts have failed. The Postmaster-General informs me that direction finding vans have attempted to locate him, but they have met with no success. This is not to be wondered at, for they are labouring under a big handicap. Since his first speech to the public The Liberator has not attempted to broadcast again, probably owing to the risk of detection by these vans. He has confined himself to statements in the Press—statements cunningly contrived so that no clue to his identity can be obtained from them. Apparently he has only made public use of his lethal apparatus on two occasions, both of them of short duration, and in widely separated parts of the country. It is not even known whether the Post Office plant is competent to detect the new rays. Quite possibly it is not.

"It becomes our duty to inquire into the

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

significance of these events and to forecast their probable effects upon the country, in order that steps may be taken for their regulation and control, that is, assuming that such regulation is necessary and desirable. At present I have an open mind on the subject, but it seems to me that some control will be needed. However great the benefit of the invention its effects will be so widespread and so universal that it will almost certainly be undesirable to leave it in the hands of one irresponsible and anonymous individual. But that is merely the personal opinion of one who knows very little of the facts. I want—we all want—to know more about it before coming to any final decision. With this object in view I requested you to obtain the advice of your departmental experts. I take it that you are all ready to bring forward your opinions on the matter?"

There was a murmur of assent and much rustling of papers.

"Will the President of the Board of Trade open the discussion, please?"

Sir Ernest Hewlett selected a sheet of paper from the bundle in front of him and rose to his feet. He rested his hands on the table as if to support his tall, drooping figure.

"If The Liberator continues his experiments on a large scale," he began, "the outlook for industry is decidedly gloomy. In fact, there

THE RAY OF DOOM

will be a wholesale dislocation of trade. There are so many manufacturing processes which depend wholly or partially upon bacterial action. Some of them are carried out on a small scale only and are hardly worthy of notice from a national point of view, although they are naturally important enough to the people concerned. There are many others, however, which are of great importance to all of us.

"I understand that an essential part of linen manufacture is the 'retting' of the flax. This consists of separating the useful fibres from the woody parts of the plant by maceration and bacterial decomposition, and cannot be done by mechanical means. Bacterial action is essential in a similar way in the manufacture of jute, hemp and coconut fibre. These industries are large and flourishing, and considerable inconvenience would be caused by the stoppage of the supply of household and personal linen, cheap carpets, sacking, ropes and mats. I regret that I have no recent statistics referring to these trades. My advisers were intentionally told not to go into great detail in their replies, in order to make them as clear and lucid as possible. But it occurred to me on my way here that it would be interesting and instructive to know the magnitude of some of the industries whose fate is hanging in the balance. According to the only encyclopædia which was available at the moment, I found that nearly four and

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

three-quarter million acres were devoted to the cultivation of flax twenty-five years ago. At the same period the jute crop in India was about one and a half million tons. Quite possibly it has increased since then. My figures are out of date, but they suffice to show the importance of these substances.

"To indicate the wide ramifications of a discovery such as this I may mention two minor industries which would be abolished; the maceration of marine sponges and the preparation of osteological specimens for schools of anatomy. Two other processes must next be considered, and they form a striking contrast in size. They are not strictly bacterial, but are dependent upon yeast. For our purposes the distinction is purely academic, because yeast is a unicellular organism and is known to be susceptible to the new rays. The baking of bread would be difficult in the absence of the traditional method. This would cause much inconvenience, but fortunately nothing worse. Bread can be aerated by other methods than the agency of yeast, but these require elaborate machinery, which would be out of the reach of the small baker and the housewife. This would mean that large firms which could afford the necessary aerating plant would have a monopoly of the industry. The only alternative for the home baker is unleavened bread. The other trade completely overshadows the ones I have

THE RAY OF DOOM

already mentioned. It is of such vast proportions and such widespread importance that it is often known as The Trade. Moreover, it would not be merely inconvenienced but utterly abolished. The brewing of beer would be impossible, for there is no substitute for yeast. I need not emphasise the disturbance which interference with this process would involve. Breweries would come to a standstill, public houses would be closed, draymen and coopers thrown out of work. Many excisemen would be redundant and the whole complicated structure of the licensing laws would be obsolete. Bottle makers would be robbed of their best customers.

"Futhermore, all methods of food preservation will be unnecessary. Tinned meat and tinned fruit will not be required. The drying or condensing of milk will be a waste of labour when fresh milk will travel all over the world untainted. In the absence of the germs which cause decomposition and decay fresh food will remain fresh indefinitely. In fact, the whole principle of our methods of food preservation, at present so essential in areas of crowded population which do not grow their own food supplies, depends upon the destruction or exclusion of bacteria. In their absence ice and refrigerators will be superfluous; drying, smoking and salting processes will no longer be required. Eggs will keep without water-glass and chemical preservatives will be out

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

of date. It is not difficult to imagine the amount of labour which will be displaced, the number of firms which will be adversely affected and the amount of capital which will be lost."

Without further ado Sir Ernest sat down. There was no need for rhetoric or oratory to conclude his speech. His facts were sufficient to cause a deep impression upon his audience, and they were men not easily impressed. With all their faults they were men of wide and mature experience, thoroughly accustomed to an atmosphere of political and financial crises and emergencies; but here were mysterious happenings outside ordinary experience, which promised to give rise to utter disaster. However, perhaps the Board of Trade experts were looking at things with too jaundiced an eye. There would be other opinions to come. Committees and Cabinets may be cumbersome and unwieldy, they may be slow in coming to a decision, but they have one solid advantage. They see their problems from more varied angles than it is possible for any one man to do.

The Prime Minister, who had been making copious notes as Sir Ernest's catalogue of facts and predictions unfolded itself, looked at the Home Secretary and nodded.

"There is not much to be said from my point of view," began Mr. Ripponden. "Only

THE RAY OF DOOM

one point occurs to me which arises out of Sir Ernest's lucid summary of the situation. Industrial unrest and discontent will inevitably arise from the sudden displacement of an army of workmen, and this will be exaggerated, perhaps even to the extent of rioting, by the absence of beer."

Down went another note upon the Prime Minister's writing pad. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was the next to rise.

"Mine is an extremely difficult task," he said in his well-known drawl. "It is comparatively easy—comparatively, I say—to forecast the future as regards one country, and especially our own, whose reactions to emergencies of all kinds are pretty well known. It is another matter to predict what is going to happen to other nations, some of which lack the steady influence of tradition. I should say that the main effects of The Liberator's discovery will be felt in North and South America. I should be inclined to expect rioting almost amounting to civil war in Chicago owing to the collapse of the meat canning business, and, I may add, speaking unofficially, the collapse of the boot-legging industry. I am also advised, but I think the Minister of Agriculture is going to deal with this point more fully, that Chilean nitrates will rise enormously in value—that they will in fact become by far the most valuable material in

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

the world. Chile will almost certainly prohibit their export in order to preserve this essential store for herself. It may even happen in that case that other nations in their extremity may attempt to overcome this embargo by force, thus imperilling the Monroe doctrine and the peace of the world."

"Surely," interposed Mr. Herdman. "If nitrates become so valuable it will be to the interest of the country to sell them while prices are good?"

"No, sir, with all due deference, I think not. The Minister of Agriculture will make my meaning clearer in his review of the situation, but I will just add a few words in explanation of the apparent paradox. Some things are too valuable to sell. A man does not sell his lifebelt when the ship is going down, nor does he barter his last drop of water in the desert. He may give it away—but nations don't do that sort of thing. They have not the morality nor the altruism of individuals."

Mr. Herdman nodded his head uncertainly. He evidently did not quite follow the argument. "I withdraw my objection for the moment," he said. "Let us have all our facts before we discuss them."

"My news is more optimistic," began the Minister of Health. "The Chief Medical Officer's forecast is enthusiastic, provided that

THE RAY OF DOOM

The Liberator's invention is used with due care and under adequate control."

"Yes, but that is exactly what The Liberator will not permit. Still, let us have your report as it stands."

"He anticipates a complete cessation of all epidemic diseases—for there can be no interference or obstruction by conscientious objectors, which has always been a source of weakness in other campaigns for the control of epidemics—smallpox for example. The rays can be applied to a district and will affect all the inhabitants of that district, with or without their consent, and they will be as little conscious of their deliverance as they are at present of the countless wireless waves which are constantly passing around and through every one of us."

This was a new thought to some of those present, and more than one Cabinet Minister involuntarily looked round as if expecting to see the wireless waves which were taking such liberties with his person.

"In addition to this there will be a large reduction in infantile mortality—in fact, in the mortality rate generally, at all ages up to seventy or thereabouts. This will probably more than neutralise the falling birth rate, and the population will go up far more rapidly than it has done for many decades. The average life will be longer, and the percentage

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

of old people larger than at present. This will affect my friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, for the cost of pensions and similar social services will rise considerably.

"The Registrar General's department is at present engaged in estimating the probable future death rate on the assumption that bacterial diseases of all kinds will be virtually abolished. This is a long and intricate calculation and is not yet complete."

"I should have thought it was easy enough," put in Colonel Walkington. "All they have to do is to take the present deaths and deduct all those due to germs."

"No, it is not quite so simple as that. The proportion of deaths assigned to bacterial diseases of all kinds is, I believe, about one third of the whole, but that does not mean that the death rate will drop one third. The Registrar General's medical statistician pointed this out to me in order to explain why his estimate would not be ready for this meeting. He agreed that more people will escape the perils of infancy and adult life, but said that the resultant raising of the average age of the population would mean more deaths from the diseases of middle and old age—notably cancer, which is probably not bacterial.

"The Chief Medical Officer, as a matter of financial precaution, has already circularised all Local Authorities and recommended that

THE RAY OF DOOM

any proposed expenditure on Isolation Hospitals be postponed. As regards other institutions there will be no immediate alteration in the need for asylum accommodation, although in the future the incidence of insanity will tend to decrease, as a certain proportion of it is due to germ diseases. Sanatoria for the treatment of tuberculosis will, I hope, be superfluous. Hospital accommodation generally, at present inadequate, as shown by the unwieldly waiting lists on the books of all voluntary hospitals, will be more than sufficient. On the other hand institutions owned by Public Assistance Committees may have to be enlarged, owing to the greater proportion of old people in the population.

"The problem of a clean milk supply, which has caused trouble for many years, is almost certainly solved, and also the question of purification of drinking water."

The Minister paused a moment, and the Cabinet looked more cheerful than before. This seemed to be fairly good news on the whole; certainly it was the best so far.

"Those, gentlemen, are the advantages which would result from the use of the rays with due care and discrimination. If they are employed in an irresponsible manner, as seems probable, there are other considerations involved and the outlook is less satisfactory. The disposal of sewage would be an insoluble problem,

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

because all the methods now in use depend ultimately upon bacterial decomposition. Without this the world will be burdened with an immense and constantly increasing mass of waste material which cannot be destroyed. Also, all the waste products of the earth, inedible roots, stems and leaves, undergrowths of forests and the vast quantity of vegetable refuse which Nature brings forth in such profusion each year, millions of tons of it, all this normally rots and decays and is restored by bacterial action to the soil whence it came, and is again available as food for new life in its turn. All this will be incorruptible, indestructible except by fire. Again, cremation will be the only means of disposing of the dead. This will conflict with the religious beliefs of many, but it will be the only solution.

"There will be a certain amount of displacement of highly skilled labour—many bacteriologists and laboratory workers will find their occupation gone, in addition to a large number of medical men who at present depend indirectly upon bacteria for a living, as the majority of doctors do."

The Minister of Health folded his notes with an air of finality and sat down. The next speaker was Mr. Bryan Bailey, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"It is obvious," he began, "that the far-reaching disturbances described by the previous

THE RAY OF DOOM

speakers will have very profound effects upon the financial world. At first I imagine that there will be a general feeling of uncertainty. Some people will believe the rumours which are circulating and others will not, and their actions will vary accordingly. If it is rumoured, for example, that all breweries will be compelled to suspend operations and close down, stock-brokers who believe that this calamity will happen will bear the market—that is they will sell shares, even shares which they do not at the moment possess, in the hope of buying them back at a lower price for delivery on settlement day. So long as there is a market for these securities they may repeat this process time after time, making a profit on each deal. And for a time there will be plenty of people anxious both to buy and to sell, according to their personal belief or disbelief in the rumours of impending disaster. Again, when the shares are dropping in value the bulls may step in and buy, hoping for a rise. When they find that no rise is likely to take place they will rush to get out and cut their losses, but many will be left with valueless paper on their hands.

“There will be such confusion that dealings in these shares will probably be stopped. More likely, as the industries affected are so numerous, the Stock Exchange will be closed. There would, of course, be a rush to buy nitrate shares

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

and chemical company stock. I imagine that the chemical industry in general will gain far more from the demand for artificial fertilisers than it will lose from decreased sales of disinfectants and drugs. But I will leave this point to the Minister of Agriculture. The Bank Rate would be raised to stop speculation. Joint stock banks would be profoundly affected by the crisis. Overdrafts granted on the security of shares, which in the majority of cases would be depreciating, would be insufficiently covered, and further security would have to be demanded. This would lead to wholesale bankruptcies.

“The effect of the industrial upheaval on the national finances will be absolutely disastrous and a huge Budget deficit will have to be faced. Breweries have always been milch cows for the Exchequer, and the annual yield of taxation from beer and kindred liquors is in the neighbourhood of a hundred million pounds. A very large sum in Income Tax is also obtained from the industry and its shareholders. All this will presumably be lost to the Treasury. Coincidentally with this enormous decrease in the national income, a decrease of perhaps three million pounds a week, there will be, as the Minister of Health remarked, a large increase in the cost of pensions and maintenance of the aged. The younger generation will have a fearful burden to bear, one which will be

THE RAY OF DOOM

crushing in its magnitude. I am truly sorry that I have to paint such a gloomy picture of the future, but it has never been my habit to shirk facts, however unpleasant."

The Chancellor resumed his seat and the last contributor to the discussion rose. This was Colonel the Right Honourable James Walkington, C.M.G., Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.

"On one point I can reassure you, gentlemen. There is no need to worry about all the disasters and calamities which have been predicted by my colleagues." Glances of surprise, relief and incredulity greeted this announcement. Colonel Walkington's reputation for bluntness and pugnacity was notorious, but such a direct repudiation of other ministers' opinions was absolutely unexpected, even from him. Mr. Herdman, easygoing and imperturbable as he was, frowned upon his unruly subordinate. The Minister continued with grim humour.

"I go so far as to say that industrial upheavals, wholesale bankruptcies, Stock Exchange panics and Budget deficits are merely trifles of no practical importance—and that for a very good reason. If the Liberator carries out his plan of sterilising the whole earth the future does not matter, for there will be no future!"

There was a gasp of amazement as Colonel Walkington paused for breath. Although his

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

audience was accustomed to shocks and crises of all kinds, although they were perfectly familiar with the gloomy opinions which had been expressed in the newspapers, this official pronouncement, coming from a responsible minister and backed by the considered opinion and authority of his departmental advisers, was a trifle overpowering. The Colonel's method of breaking the news was also partly responsible for the effect it produced. Such things are not usually expressed so curtly and abruptly in government circles. Unpalatable truths are generally wrapped up in carefully worded memoranda, hedged about by terms of reference and minority reports, preceded by minutes and explanatory prefaces and followed sedately by schedules and appendices, so that the kernel of the matter is decently tucked away, as castor oil is hidden between layers of lemon juice.

Only a man with Colonel Walkington's impish humour would have bludgeoned his hearers in this manner. He was always a fearlessly direct speaker and a redoubtable opponent in debate. He never permitted himself to be led astray by side issues or to be restrained by false sentimentality. His speeches invariably began by tearing the heart out of the subject. Then, and only then, did he begin to discuss it. He looked round the room with a faint smile. Having exploded his bomb, he now began to analyse the fragments.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"I am requested by my technical advisers to put forward the following points for your consideration. I must ask pardon for sometimes being childish elementary, and at other times going into scientific details, but it is essential in order that the matter may be explained clearly and fully. As you have already heard, it affects my colleagues very considerably, but their departments are comparatively untouched compared to the profound revolution which The Liberator's scheme will inaugurate in the industries and the Department which I have the honour to represent. We can do without jute, we can do without anatomical specimens, we can even dispense with beer and yet keep our bodies alive. In fact there is only one essential trade in the world—that of food production. I do not suggest that life would be as easy, as pleasant or as safe as it is to-day if all else were abolished. It would not, but it could continue after a fashion. If all trades but this were to cease then civilisation as we know it would stop, but that is all. Towns and cities could not exist, but mankind would have the alternative of returning to the simplicity of savage life with the family as the largest unit. Banks, shops, transport, buildings, health services—all the marvellous complexities of modern times could disappear and life would go on. One man and one only is indispens-

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

able—the farmer, using the word in its widest sense.

"City dwellers are apt to under-estimate his importance, because food as they know it comes, not from the land but from the shops. Milk, to them, does not come from the cow but from bottles and tins, and its primary source is apt to be forgotten. Modern business methods are laying more and more stress on the artificial appearance of foods. Fifty years ago a grocer's shop contained sacks and casks of goods, which with a little imagination could be pictured as being brought from a farm. The grocer bought his stock in bulk and did the blending, mixing and weighing himself. To-day everything is sold in packets, boxes, bottles and tins, sealed at the factory and bearing the factory trade mark. The retailer is becoming more and more an automatic machine whose main function is to hand out sealed packets across the counter. Blending is of less importance to the modern grocer than a knowledge of how to make an attractive window display with his multi-coloured packets and cartons. I do not say that this tendency is altogether bad; it has led to a great widening of variety and improvement in quality. Where the shopkeeper of the nineteenth century kept ten varieties of food in stock he now keeps a hundred. Where he sold indifferent goods at the highest price he could get he now sells

THE RAY OF DOOM

standard qualities at a standard price. One can go into any little shop in the remotest village and buy a branded article at the same price and of the same quality as that sold by the big London stores. The manufacturing firms, for their reputations' sake, dare not lower the quality and they cannot charge exorbitantly because of fierce competition. Also, the goods are produced under better conditions. Instead of being tipped into the scale by dirty fingers they are weighed and packed by automatic machinery in a garden city. No, there are many good features about the modern system, but, and this is the point I am trying to make, it tends to obscure the importance of the primary producer, the farmer.

"Nor does it matter to-day if a local harvest fails. A drought which would have spelt death and utter disaster in the days when transport was slow and food preservation unreliable, is now a minor event. Food supplies are both abundant and mobile. Britain herself—the whole country—is in a perpetual state of local famine. For years she has not grown enough to feed herself, but relies to a large extent on excess food grown elsewhere, and the certainty that it can be transported cheaply and easily. The supreme importance of these new rays lies in the fact that if all bacteria are destroyed, all farming will be brought to a standstill. Not locally but everywhere. Not partly but

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

completely. Glass works may turn out milk bottles by the million, but there will be no milk with which to fill them. Box makers and printers may go on making food containers, but there will be no food to put into the packets.

"Summed up, the position is this; at present we have abundant food and abundant bacteria which make food preservation a mighty industry. In the future, if The Liberator is allowed to carry out his mad scheme, there will be no difficulty in food preservation except that there will be no food to preserve."

Colonel Walkington stopped and took a drink of water. There was no doubt about the impression which his speech had made. Mr. Herdman was listening intently, with his chin cupped in his hands and his elbows resting on the table. The Home Secretary was leaning back in his chair, but his eyes never left the speaker. The Chancellor did not lift his gaze from the inkpot in front of him, but the sternness of his expression belied his careless attitude. The Colonel put down his glass and continued.

"You may ask what bacteria, which one usually associates with disease, have to do with food. In order to answer this it is necessary to recapitulate a few simple scientific facts. The earth has been inhabited for millions of years, and it has supported countless millions of lives. Generation after generation the river of life flows on and yet the food supply never

THE RAY OF DOOM

runs short. The reason is that the available material is used over and over again, circulating in a never-ending cycle of chemical change from plants to animals and back again to plants. It is a literal fact that any one of you at this moment may contain in your body atoms which actually formed part of the body of Alexander the Great or of the extinct brontosaurus or of the wooden beams of Solomon's Temple. These things no longer exist as such, but their constituent atoms were not destroyed when they rotted away, for atoms are indestructible. Therefore, these same atoms are still doing duty as part of something, quite possibly as part of somebody, perhaps even as part of myself.

"Animals are unable to utilise simple chemical compounds as food, and depend upon the vegetable kingdom to do this work for them. Even carnivorous animals live indirectly upon vegetables. The steak you eat for lunch is really derived from grass eaten by the cow and built up by her into concentrated and palatable food. Vegetables, on the contrary, make use of simple chemical substances in the soil, which are derived from the breakdown of dead animal and vegetable structures and waste materials from the living. But the vegetable world cannot make use of these substances in their original state. To act as plant food they must first of all be broken

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

down or decomposed by bacteria. This is the crux of the situation—destroy the bacteria and you destroy an integral part of the great life cycle of Nature, the vital link which closes the chain. In doing so the ultimate result is the death of all vegetation and so the death of all living things from starvation.

"There are other ways in which bacteria are essential to the life cycle. The breakdown of organic material by decomposition is in part carried too far, and some of the valuable nitrogen escapes into the atmosphere. It is then lost to the life cycle, because neither plants nor animals can make use of it as such. There is a further waste of nitrogen in the constant discharge of sewage into the sea. This, except for a small amount which is returned as fish, is permanently lost to the land. When I say small amount I mean about seven hundred thousand tons a year in this country alone, which is the amount of fish landed. But that is a negligible quantity when dealing with Nature's large scale operations. Again, explosions of all kinds mean a loss of nitrogen.

"This apparent defect in the cycle, this leakage which seems likely to unbalance the books, is remedied by certain nitrifying bacteria, which recover the nitrogen from the air and transform it into compounds which can be utilised by plants, thus bringing it back again into the common food stock. The whole of

THE RAY OF DOOM

agriculture consists in regulating the life cycle with the aid of bacteria. For thousands of years before bacteria were known to exist, the farmer was in fact controlling them and making use of them without knowing it. They enter into his daily work at every turn. Cheese making, butter making, the ripening of manure, the storage of fodder in silos—all these are bacterial processes. More than this, every farmer knows that it is not possible to continue taking crops from the same soil indefinitely without putting something back into it, which is usually done by ploughing in organic matter of various kinds and trusting to bacterial action to make it fit for use.

“The value of bacteria must not be underestimated because they are invisible. They are present everywhere, and their power of multiplication is enormous. They reproduce their kind by simply splitting into two, which process may be repeated every twenty minutes. One individual, theoretically, could give rise to two thousand million in twenty-four hours, but they are so infinitely small that even this astronomical number would only weigh one three-hundredth of a grain. At the end of the next twenty-four hours the descendants of the original individual would weigh three quarters of a ton—I will not give you the figures in millions because they are quite beyond the imagination. This rate of acceleration is

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

terrific—awe-inspiring in its reckless violence. In a few more days the whole earth would be crowded out with them and there would be no room for anything else. Needless to say, this stupendous increase never takes place in practice owing to limitations of food supply or other adverse conditions, which always apply the brake before the situation gets out of hand, but it serves as an example of the immensity of the forces which are constantly working in Nature, even though they are invisible; as an example of the importance of the organisms which The Liberator so lightly proposes to exterminate.

“If the earth were sterilised starvation might be staved off for a while by the use of artificial fertilisers, and the Foreign Secretary has already mentioned the vital importance which Chilean nitrates would assume. But even nitrates are not everything. Immense chemical factories would have to be set up everywhere to manufacture the other essential manures. Possibly the derelict breweries might be used for this purpose. Steps would also have to be taken to rectify the constant wastage of nitrogen into the atmosphere, which at present rectifies itself automatically. This would mean the building of huge electrical generating stations for the sole purpose of ‘fixing’ atmospheric nitrogen. The process would have to be done on such an immense scale that all governments

THE RAY OF DOOM

would probably be compelled to prohibit the use of electricity for any other purpose whatever. It must be remembered that civilisation will be faced with the problem of trying to equal the vast forces of Nature which are at present at work everywhere, all over the fifty million square miles of land surface of the globe. The task seems utterly hopeless.

"It is now clear, I think, why I said that there was no need to worry about financial and industrial troubles. Insufficient cover to a bank overdraft seems less important somehow when the whole world is about to die from insufficient food; and there is a certain element of poetic justice in the thought of a stockbroker selling what he does not possess and receiving money which will be of no use to him when he has got it."

Colonel Walkington was noted for his hatred of the artificialities of life, and it was typical of the man to indulge in these pointed references to financial transactions. There was absolute silence for a few moments when he finished speaking, for his words had struck deep, and it was no time for idle debate. The Home Secretary stared out of the window at a pigeon on the roof opposite, but he did not see it, for his mind was full of a vision of universal famine and death. The Chancellor slowly and carefully tore a sheet of paper into little strips, but the action was wholly automatic. He too was

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

thinking of a dead and barren world, of the endless chain of life smashed and broken beyond repair by the caprice of a monomaniac, and his soul revolted at the injustice of it. Had mankind lived in vain, and was this really the end? If so, was it mere blind chance or part of the Great Architect's design? Perhaps the slate was being rubbed clean so that a fresh start could be made, free from the failures and errors of the world as we know it. But surely in that case the Creator would stand self-convicted of incompetence? Or was it merely that He was bored with His handiwork, that He had found life to be a nuisance, an irresponsible and rebellious blot upon the mechanical perfection of the universe?

Mr. Parker Herdman pushed back his chair and rose slowly and heavily to his feet. His famous and much photographed smile had vanished, and his face looked old and tired.

"This is far more serious than anything I had imagined," he began. "Before such events as these all previous catastrophes fade into insignificance. We may gauge the immensity of the forces involved by a comparison with the World War, by common consent the greatest disaster in history. For four years all the resources of science and civilisation were devoted to the destruction of mankind on a wholesale scale, with results which you all know. Upwards of twenty million men were

THE RAY OF DOOM

killed—and a few years later the population everywhere was more numerous than before, showing how feeble, how impotent are the forces at our command when ranged against the regenerative powers of Nature. Ignoring sentiment for the moment, and ignoring all the financial aftermath of war, which as Colonel Walkington tells us, is largely artificial, we see that its scars are completely obliterated in less than twenty years. Population losses have been more than replaced, food supplies are greater than ever, even if there are difficulties in their sale and distribution, and in a word the war might never have happened. This illustrates the truth of Colonel Walkington's opinion that it is hopeless to compete against Nature on a large scale.

"The Liberator, by upsetting the balance of natural forces, by destroying things which the ordinary man has never seen, is about to do far more than all the nations of the world accomplished in their four years orgy of destruction. Universal and inevitable death from starvation is the prospect before us. One can visualise food supplies dwindling and receding everywhere; each harvest reaped from the failing earth will take from it something which can never be replaced. In those last years life will be lived on capital and not upon income, and will be slowly and surely choked out and extinguished by the volume of its own

THE MEETING OF THE CABINET

waste products. For us who have nearly lived our lives, whose time is running short, it is of no great import. But what of the younger generation, and the generations yet unborn?

"Gentlemen, I think you will agree with me that there is only one thing to be done. The man who wields this awful power must be found at all costs."

CHAPTER VII

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

SERGEANT LEVERTON came into Inspector Drury's room bringing with him some finger print enlargements, carefully mounted and marked to show their points of resemblance. Innumerable little arrows, all neatly numbered, indicated the features of similarity which were destined to lead a murderer to the scaffold. Twenty-seven of them were there, and sixteen are enough to prove identity in court.

Drury looked at the prints and saw the ridge lakes and island ridges dear to the hearts of the finger print department, but not with the eagerness which he usually displayed when the end of a big case was in sight.

"What's the latest, sir?" asked Leverton, arranging his photographs on the desk. "I haven't seen the papers this morning."

Drury did not ask to what he was referring. There was only one topic of conversation in those days. Finger prints, even when all ready for the witness box, were of secondary importance.

"The Liberator has another long letter in

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

the *Daily Wire*," he replied. "You remember that official announcement on Thursday requesting him to come forward and put his cards on the table?"

"Yes. I thought it seemed rather a come-down for the Government to do a thing like that."

"Perhaps it was, but it seems that this invention is most frightfully important. They must get hold of the chap at any price, and yet he isn't a criminal and so they want to try persuasion first. Well, he absolutely refuses to have anything to do with their offer, and talks a lot of hot air about robbing the inventor of his due reward and that sort of rubbish. He seems to have a persecution complex about it. He can't or won't see that killing all the germs is going to do any harm, and quotes a leading article in the *Daily Wire* as his authority. They said that his rays could never be misused, you know, before anybody knew anything about them—that's just like the *Daily Wire*—and he thinks that all the experts' opinions are faked up because they are jealous of him."

"So he's going on with it then?"

"Apparently. There seems to be a bit of a panic in the City already. Look at those tape machine prices."

Leverton took up a strip of the paper tape as it clicked into the basket. Morgan's

THE RAY OF DOOM

Breweries had slumped from two pounds ten to thirty-eight shillings; National Chemicals had risen from three and fourpence to five and elevenpence. United Cold Storage had dropped heavily, whilst Associated Bakeries advanced from fifteen and six to twenty-one shillings. The results predicted by the Chancellor of the Exchequer were beginning.

"What are the Government going to do next?" inquired Leverton.

"This, for a start," said Drury, picking up a paper from the desk. "Just come in about an hour ago. It's a proclamation under an order in Council. Anybody who knows or suspects the identity or the whereabouts of the person known as The Liberator must forthwith give information to the police. That'll mean about four thousand false alarms, I suppose. Every silly ass who hears his next door neighbour's loud speaker oscillating will rush off and report it. Also there's a chit here from the Commissioner—they've been having a conference half the night. McCarthy told me all about it first thing this morning." McCarthy was Drury's Chief Constable. "The Home Office has handed the job over to us—The Liberator must be found, urgent, express, immediate, confidential and so on."

"And how the blazes do they expect us to find him?" asked Leverton, reasonably enough. "It seems a bit of a tall order to find a man

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

nobody has ever seen, who lives at some place unknown and who hasn't done anything which might leave any traces. What do they think we are? Thought readers or palmists or something of that sort?"

"It's just possible they may think we are detectives," replied Drury cuttingly.

"Oo, I'd better get back into the cheese again," said Leverton.

"Look here, my lad, I've told you before not to give up cases before they've begun. You're paid large sums per annum . . ."

"Am I?" Perhaps Leverton was thinking of the economy cuts in police pay and salaries.

"Well, anyhow you're paid something—probably about twice as much as you're worth—to do things. And if you can't do them, think about them until you can—that is if you've got anything to think with!" This was a trifle unfair, for Leverton was a smart man, even if he was rather pessimistic by temperament. "It's a great chance for all of us," continued Drury. "As you say, there's nothing to go upon—and you're not the only person to realise that. This chit here admits as much. Nobody else knows how to start or where to begin. So they've asked for suggestions. Anybody who can think of an opening move—no matter what it is so long as it seems reasonable—let him now speak and gain much kudos!"

THE RAY OF DOOM

"There was a famous story," said Leverton meditatively. "I forgot what it was about . . ."

"That's the worst of your stories. They're all like Melchisedec—got no beginning and no end."

"But it mentioned a blind man in a coal-cellar at midnight looking for a black cat that wasn't there. He'd got a soft job on compared with this one!"

"Yes, I know. But it's no good wasting time talking about difficulties. We've got to do something about it. Can you think of anything?"

"What about searching all houses with wireless sets and examining them?"

Drury thought this over for a moment.

"No good," was his decision. "You'd want about three million search warrants and about thirty thousand experts to examine the sets. Besides, all The Liberator would have to do would be to hide his apparatus and produce an ordinary wireless set for inspection."

"Prohibit the carrying of portable sets, then."

"That wouldn't help. If his machine is portable he could use it at home or he could disguise it when he wanted to take it out. No, we shall have to try again. And, while we are about it, let's get all the data we can. Go down to the library and get the files of

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

the *Daily Wire* for the last three weeks. It's a rotten rag, but it seems to know a bit more about The Liberator than any of the other papers."

Five minutes later Leverton returned with a bundle of *Daily Wires*, and Drury began to read through the whole episode from the beginning. Slowly and carefully he went through the mass of print, especially The Liberator's own letters, which were really the only authentic items in a froth of sensational speculation and theory. When he had finished he refolded the last copy and put it back in its proper place at the bottom of the pile.

"Seems to me," he began, "that there's only one way to start—and it doesn't look too promising."

Leverton was all attention. Drury was generally worth listening to when he was talking over a case.

"The first point is this. I'm not an expert in these things, but I know that you can't generate wireless rays and X-rays with the same machine. Now The Liberator's rays are different from anything that has ever been produced before, so presumably the apparatus which makes them will be different. That's pretty obvious. Also the man himself talked about 'my first successful apparatus' in his broadcast speech, which sounds like a special model. So we are certain that he couldn't buy

THE RAY OF DOOM

his outfit in ready-made parts from a wireless shop, like those chaps who tell you they built their own set, when all they've done is to buy the pieces and screw them together. Well, if he couldn't, it had to be specially made."

Leverton looked puzzled. All this was true enough, but it didn't seem to be leading anywhere.

"If so," went on Drury, "either he made it himself or got somebody else to do it. If it was home-made we're done and shall have to go back to the beginning again. But I don't think he did make it himself, because he talks a lot about money difficulties delaying his work. That sounds as though he was paying somebody to do it for him. Well, if somebody else made it, all we have to do is to find out who did the job, and he'll probably be able to put us on to his employer."

"All we have to do," repeated Leverton reflectively. "Even that sounds a pretty big undertaking."

"It is," agreed Drury. "But it does at least give us a start. Anyhow this isn't a job for one or two of us. The Home Office are prepared to turn any number of men on to it. It takes precedence of everything else."

"How would you begin, sir?"

"We shall have to think that out. I'll go and have a talk to McCarthy and see if he thinks the idea worth forwarding."

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

McCarthy did think it worth considering and instructed Drury to get on with the preliminaries what time his suggestion wended its way up the ladder of precedence, from Chief Constable to Assistant Commissioner, from Assistant Commissioner to Commissioner, from Commissioner to the Home Office.

It was a forlorn hope, but the only one. None of the ordinary police methods were of any avail. Even that great standby, the *modus operandi* system, was useless for once.

If a stranger were to explore Scotland Yard or any other large police head-quarters he would sooner or later come across a department where apparently futile and trivial details are being entered in a huge card index. He might see a police officer, for instance, making out and filing entries under the headings "milk" and "sardines." At first sight this appears to be departmentalism run mad, red tape of the most ensanguined hue, but it is not by any means as silly as it sounds. Let the curtain rise upon the sequel and the reason for the card index will emerge. Our imaginary stranger probably goes home seething with wrath at the waste of time and money which is permitted in official circles, and quite prepared to write to the papers about it. On arrival he finds that his house has been burgled in his absence. This merely adds fuel to the fire of his indignation. If the police didn't waste their time doing office boys' work

THE RAY OF DOOM

—and silly, superfluous sort of work at that—perhaps they'd be able to protect the law-abiding citizen's property more efficiently—and much more to the same effect.

In response to a telephone call the police arrive and begin to take particulars in the inevitable notebook. It is found that the burglar, before leaving, has had a meal of milk and sardines in the kitchen. This trivial and irrelevant incident, useless in itself, becomes a most valuable piece of information in conjunction with the card index. The cards labelled sardines and milk will probably give the name, aliases, address and previous convictions of some gentleman known to the police, whose habit it is to consume these delicacies after a successful night's work.

Needless to say, facts of this sort do not constitute proof, but they give a very useful start to a case and may lead directly to the discovery of conclusive evidence. This in short is the *modus operandi* system, and it depends entirely upon the psychological fact that criminals are creatures of routine and tend to repeat themselves. Obviously such methods were not applicable in the present case. Clues in the ordinary sense of the word were completely absent, and the only method of approach seemed to be the indirect one proposed by Drury. At any rate no one had a better to suggest.

DRURY HAS AN IDEA

"What we've got to do," said the inspector to Leverton, "is to get a directory and go through it from beginning to end, crossing out all the entries that are no use to us. Then every one that's left must be visited and asked if they have made any unusual electrical apparatus or parts of apparatus lately, or anything out of the ordinary which they don't know the use of. Get the London Directory and divide it up into reasonable sized sections and put a man on to each."

Drury reached out his hand for the classified telephone directory, which happened to be more accessible.

"Most of them should be easy enough," he went on, turning over the pages. "A lot of trades can be crossed out straight away. Banks, building societies, butchers, doctors, film renters, greengrocers, monumental masons, music teachers, osteopaths, paper bag makers and so on. Gee, what a lot of queer trades!" He went back to the beginning of the book again. "A lot can be left in straight away—coppersmiths, die sinkers, electricians, gramophone repairers, motor engineers, scientific instrument makers, watch makers, wireless dealers—anybody who might by any stretch of the imagination make parts to order. If there are any doubtful ones put them in or refer them to me."

Leverton flicked over the pages with his thumb.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"There'll be thousands of places on the list in London alone," he said.

"I know. And it will have to be done all over the country. It's a tremendous undertaking. But the Home Office orders were absolutely definite. No trouble or expense is to be spared, and as many men as necessary are to be put on to it; I reckon it will take about half the police force to do the visiting. Let's see, that's about twenty-five thousand men for the whole country. Well, twenty-five thousand men can do a lot."

"Surely it won't need as many as that?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. You see, all the visiting will have to be done in as short a time as possible. The whole thing must be kept secret and we must have a zero hour, like they had in the trenches. Then when everything is ready, all the inquiries are done together. If we take several days over the job everybody will be talking about it and The Liberator will have time to disappear. We shall be able to estimate how many men are wanted when we get the lists made out. I should think it'll be the biggest Government rush since the War Loan conversion, when they printed and distributed fifteen million forms in less than twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER VIII

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

AL HIGGINS, the acknowledged king of Chicago gangsters, committed a grave error of judgment when he instructed his tailor to make his new batch of suits—twenty of them, which were intended to last for nearly six months—a shade tighter under the arms. Al was very careful about his clothes, and he had for some time had an uneasy feeling that his coats were a trifle too slack fitting for a really well dressed man.

It was a small point, merely a matter of shifting a chalk mark a quarter of an inch to the south-east on one of those hideous, one-armed, half-finished garments, all pins and tacking threads, which tailors miraculously transform into coats, but it led to results out of all proportion to its insignificance. The unusual constriction under the arms, slight though it was, prevented Mr. Higgins from drawing his gun with his accustomed ease and rapidity on an occasion when he needed it very badly indeed.

The new suit, which was really a triumph of

THE RAY OF DOOM

the tailor's art, was completely spoilt and nearly a dead loss to his valet, who received all discarded clothes as one of his very profitable perquisites. Six bullet holes reduced its value in the second hand market to one dollar fifty, and Mr. Higgins, after a most expensive funeral, slept with his fathers under an impressive and somewhat mendacious tombstone.

His place in the stormy underworld of Chicago was taken by Ed Marlini, the gentleman who had beaten him on the draw, thus keeping alive the old tradition followed by William the Conqueror and other illustrious men of history. Ed was an artist with an automatic pistol and his rise in the scale of precedence had been punctuated by many similar incidents, most of which had gained him a step in his progress to the top of the ladder. Having attained the summit of his ambition, however, he found that many other qualifications were necessary for the post, and he was not always so successful as an organiser and executive as he was with a gun.

Kings, like lesser men, have to learn their job by making mistakes and Ed was no exception to this rule, but it is one of the few advantages of being a king that the consequences of your mistakes generally fall upon the heads of your well-beloved subjects and not upon your own. Wherefore Ed Marlini mentally docketed his errors for future guidance but did not worry

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

himself unduly over them. Even in the early days of his reign (which closed a year later in a hail of machine-gun bullets), he was a man of large ideas, and this is the story of one of his first mistakes. Chicago, with its three million four hundred thousand inhabitants, was not big enough for him, and he had grandiose dreams of establishing branches of his empire in New York and London. With the first of these this history has no concern, but a few facts about his embassy to London must be mentioned.

Chuck Kelly was one of Mr. Marlini's trusted chiefs of staff—in so far as Mr. Marlini trusted anybody at all, which was not much—and so he was sent over in one of the most luxurious transatlantic liners. Money was no object with Marlini and the only reason why Chuck Kelly roughed it in the ordinary first class saloon instead of travelling in the most expensive private suite was because his chief wished him to avoid undue publicity. This visit was merely a reconnaissance to spy out the land, and to take back information which Ed required for the preparation of his plans, London being a *terra nova* to the gangs of Chicago.

Mr. Kelly, however, in his professional enthusiasm, exceeded his terms of reference. He got involved in a brawl with a man who tried to pick his pocket whilst he was inspecting, of all unlikely things, a small antique shop in a back street leading out of the Strand. Chuck

THE RAY OF DOOM

Kelly's flow of language, when his attention was suddenly diverted from artistic to financial matters, was highly transatlantic and mostly incomprehensible to the Londoner, but the general drift of it was unmistakable and of such pungency that the pickpocket lost his temper and was about to add assault and battery to his former offence. At this point, instead of calling a policeman Mr. Kelly dealt with the matter in his own way.

As the echoes of his shots died away down the street Mr. Kelly wished he hadn't done it. Not that he felt remorse or pity for his victim—he had killed far too many men to be affected by soft feelings of that sort—but because he was a stranger in a strange land and was somewhat uncertain what to do next. However, he was a great believer in the power of the gun, and he automatically carried out the usual routine which had always served him safely and well. He covered the few spectators with the ominous blue muzzle of his pistol and threatened them with instant death if they moved.

While they were occupied in keeping stiller than they had ever kept before, stimulated by the sight of the limp figure lying on the ground in front of them, Mr. Kelly slipped away down a side street and mingled unobtrusively with the stream of passers by in the Strand. This, in Chicago, would have closed the incident, and another murder would have been added to the

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

world's record, for in that city no one follows an armed gangster—and there are no such things as unarmed ones.

Unfortunately for Mr. Kelly, one of the eye-witnesses happened to be Inspector Drury, who was standing in plain clothes some distance away. It was merely by chance that he was there. It is rare for a police officer actually to see a crime committed, but in the nature of things it is bound to happen occasionally. He, like the others, was sensible enough to obey orders and stand still, taking the precaution to keep as far as possible behind a taxi which was waiting near by. During the next few seconds he was intently studying Mr. Kelly and noting for future reference every detail of his dress and features. The driving mirror of the taxi was of great help for this purpose. As soon as the murderer turned the corner Drury dashed down a parallel street and arrived in the Strand before his quarry. The inspector ran all the way, whereas Mr. Kelly walked so as to create an atmosphere of fictitious innocence. In this way began the inconspicuous shadowing of Ed Marlini's ambassador, and it continued until he decided that it was time for something to eat and entered a restaurant.

Drury immediately rang up Scotland Yard from a neighbouring call box, and in less than ten minutes six plain clothes officers arrived in a police car, which did not draw up at the door

THE RAY OF DOOM

but fifty yards short of it. Hurriedly Drury described the wanted man and gave his orders.

In ones and twos, at intervals of a few minutes, they entered the restaurant. Drury, as a matter of extra precaution, exchanged hat and coat with one of his men before he went in. Each man went straight to a table and sat down. There was no crowding to one table or anything obvious to arouse suspicion. Drury looked round under cover of the menu card. Three of the men besides himself were near enough to be instantly available. The others were farther away, but formed a useful reserve. When dealing with a man who carries firearms and is prepared to use them, the only way is to attack in overwhelming force so suddenly that he has no time to move at all. For this purpose several men are wanted, but not too many in the first rush. There must be no bungling or getting in each other's way, and the slightest error in this respect may turn bloodless success into tragic failure.

The inspector stood up and took off his borrowed coat. He looked round as if to find a place for it and dropped it on the floor. This was the signal. With one stride Drury was behind his man and had caught him by the wrists. In another instant four men had fallen upon him, one to each arm and leg. Mr. Kelly was then about as dangerous as a trussed chicken, and he was thoroughly and ignomini-

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

ously searched. When his armoury was laid on the table it formed in itself an ample apology to the *maître d'hôtel* for the disturbance, and from that point onwards justice ran its course in the ordinary way, as unemotionally as though Chuck Kelly, the terror of the underworld, were no more than a country yokel who had run amok with a meat chopper.

In vain Ed Marlini poured out money like water. The most famous and expensive advocate in the country was briefed in Kelly's defence. But in the face of numerous eye-witnesses there was no defence, and not even Sir Peter Deramore could make bricks without straw. The judge's summing up was one of the shortest on record for a murder trial and the jury did not trouble to leave the box.

On hearing the verdict Mr. Marlini sent over another of his lieutenants with two hundred thousand dollars, but it was no good. He could find no one to bribe, and none of the numerous crooks whom he consulted as to the customs of the country could tell him where to begin. In fact they were so impressed with the utter hopelessness of his mission that they even forgot to try and get a share of the money for themselves.

At this juncture Mr. Kelly's span of life was nearing its end. Only twenty-four hours remained, and Mr. Marlini at the far end of the Atlantic cable resigned himself to the inevitable. It is easy to do this when someone else's neck

THE RAY OF DOOM

is at stake ; besides, he considered that he had done everything which honour demanded. Not so his lieutenant. With dogged perseverance he searched London until he found two or three gunmen of his own nationality, and to them his scheme sounded good. Once let these Britishers see that gangsters do not lightly abandon their colleagues to the hangman, and a great new country would be as a field ripe for harvest.

Early on the morning fixed for Chuck Kelly's execution a little group of men took up their position in a house opposite the main gate of the prison. The sum they paid for one day's rent of the house seemed to them to be ridiculously small, but then their standards of value were different from those of the displaced tenant, who was amazed to receive as one day's rent about fifty per cent. more than he earned in a week of hard work. There was no other entrance to the prison, of that they were certain. Before them in the dim grey light of dawn loomed the massive walls, solid, impregnable, utterly hopeless as regards attempts at rescue.

But theirs was a more subtle plan, and they chuckled with anticipation as they looked through the dingy drawn curtains of the first floor front room.

"One window each," said Don Dishart. "Plenty of elbow room."

"Yeah. Short range, too. We couldn't miss him with peashooters."

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

The prison gate was only about twelve yards away. Machine guns were unfortunately unavailable owing to Customs difficulties, but ample substitutes were at hand. Don had a repeating rifle with which he could put ten shots into an inch circle at twice the present range. His companions were variously armed with shot guns and automatics.

"Sure we can get out the back way, bo?" queried Don.

"What d'yer think? Am I a fool? Of course we can. And there's three autos parked there with their engines well warmed up. So's we can all go off separate. Or so's to have a spare or two handy if the engine won't go when you step on the gas."

"Then all we got to do is to wait and make ourselves comfortable. Gee, I can't stand this English tobacco. Wonder what they put in it to make it taste like it does—hay or straw? Let's have another look at that picture, Walt."

Walt produced a well-thumbed newspaper cutting from his pocket and handed it over.

"So he's a cobbler, is he? The big stiff! If he's got a trade of his own what's he want to go hanging people for?"

"He won't any more."

The three men laughed. The morning was getting brighter as the sun came up, the sun which Chuck Kelly was seeing for the last time

THE RAY OF DOOM

unless . . . It was now six o'clock. The execution was timed for eight.

"Poor old Kelly," said Don. "What'll he be thinking about now?"

"Don't know. But I know what he'll think when they tell him they haven't got a hangman no more."

The speaker fondled his shot gun and trained it lovingly on to the gate.

"'Bout time he should come now," put in Square Fahrenholtz, so called because of his very Teutonic head. "We must not all of us go away from the windows."

"Who's going away? I been looking out of this damn window for three hours till I'm pop-eyed with looking. Sure it's about time he was coming, Squarey. You've said it." Don slid back the bolt of his rifle to make sure there was a cartridge in the barrel. "Say, who's this?"

A car drove up to the prison gates and two men got out. Don's rifle barrel rested on the window sill as steady as a rock, and the hard implacable eyes of the killer looked along the sights of it with the sure confidence of the expert.

"Don't shoot, not yet," advised Fahrenholtz. "That was not our cobbler. Look, one of them is a parson and the other——"

"Looks a haw haw dude anyway. Guess he's the sheriff come to see old Chuck turned off. I'd like to let him have it."

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

"No, no, wait, wait."

"I am waiting. I know they don't matter. It's him we want—the cobbler. He's the man they can't replace in a hurry."

The wicket gate opened and the waiting men entered. It clanged shut as the car moved off, and the gaunt bulk of the prison relapsed into silence. A distant clock chimed a quarter past seven. Outside the street began to wake up into life and the clatter of footsteps began to echo along its dingy pavements. Two or three women were shaking rugs and beginning their daily duties.

At half past seven a little group of men assembled outside the gate. Don Dishart studied the newspaper cutting intently and compared it with their faces. None of them, fortunately for themselves, bore the slightest resemblance to Mr. Purvis, cobbler and Home Office employee.

"This guy's going to be late," grumbled Don. "Say, they ought to be more careful." If Don had only known it they were more careful, far more careful than he thought.

Gradually the hands of the clock crept round towards eight. At five minutes to the hour Fahrenholtz had an idea.

"It looks as if there isn't going to be a show after all. Wonder if Ed's found somebody?" By this Square meant somebody to bribe.

THE RAY OF DOOM

As the clock struck eight the little crowd of men outside the gates took off their hats.

"Say, Don," suggested Walt. "Go down and see if you can find out from them boobs what's happening."

Don nodded and went downstairs. A few minutes later he came back again, white and shaking.

"You know what they say?" he quavered. "I been talking to a man who's been here for every execution for thirty years, and he says the hangman always has to be in the prison the day before. That's one of their fool regulations. Say, boys, me for home. This darn country's not safe, if they hang you for certain and there's no getting out of it. Poor old Chuck only bumped off one man, too—not counting Chicago."

Silently he unloaded his rifle and closed down the window. Across the road a man in neat blue uniform emerged from the wicket gate and pinned up a notice on the board outside.

All this happened just before *The Liberator* flashed like a shooting star across the columns of the world's newspapers. Ed Marlini was furious at the fate of his first envoy to London. Calling up another of his gang, an Englishman by birth who had not been in America long enough to acquire any distinguishing accent, he gave him his instructions.

"What you gotter do," he said, "is to dig

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

yourself into some respectable job and not play any damn fool tricks like Chuck. You know the country and you know how to behave there. There's no hurry. We can wait. Don't do anything till you get a cast iron reputation for respectability. And then be careful."

"Don't you worry about that. I'll be careful enough. I don't want to have a tight collar on just after breakfast same as Chuck Kelly had."

"After that," went on Ed, "you lay for that fool police captain—what's his name? Drury—that got Kelly strung up. Get to know all you can about him and we'll put him where he belongs. I'll see about getting that job for you. I got a friend in Mason & Archer's Stores and he'll fix it for me. He'll have to. You been in a shop before?"

"Yes, ten years. I can manage that all right."

And so—meet again Mr. Unwin, shopwalker at Mason & Archer's Ltd., engaged in laying a foundation of respectability and social standing before embarking on his real mission. Although he had graduated in the toughest school in the world, and although he was thoroughly accustomed to violence of all kinds, Mr. Unwin still had a few things to learn, and Mr. Learoyd, the little jeweller from Yorkshire, had taught him some of them. Perhaps it was because of his familiarity with violent methods

THE RAY OF DOOM

that Mr. Learoyd's timid and gentle subtlety succeeded so well.

His anger at being taken in so easily can better be imagined than described, and he determined to add yet another task to those already allotted to him. A little private investigation on his own behalf as to the whereabouts of Mr. Learoyd would make, he decided, a pleasant form of recreation, which would become still more enjoyable when he succeeded in finding him.

For the time being, however, he was compelled to bottle up his resentment and wait, there being no clues whatever to go upon. Consequently he was free to spend his spare time concentrating upon his other task, that of collecting information about Inspector Drury, who had aroused the wrath of Ed Marlini more by the ease and simplicity with which he had arrested the late Mr. Kelly than by the damning evidence which he had brought up against him. It hurt Marlini's vanity to know that a parcel of plain clothes cops without a weapon amongst the lot of them had bundled his best gunman into the penitentiary without ceremony and without bloodshed.

Once a week it was Mr. Unwin's duty to ring up Chicago on the transatlantic phone and report progress, if any, to Marlini himself. The latter was reasonable enough and did not expect impossibilities, but he liked to keep in touch

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

with his far-flung agents even when they were engaged in tasks requiring endless patience.

"Say, that you, Unwin?"

"Yes."

"How's things?"

"Nix so far. I haven't got properly bedded down yet."

"All right. Take your time. I don't wanna hurry you. But listen; there's another job you can do at the same time. Snoop round a bit and see if you can find out about this Liberator."

"Find out what about him?"

"Anything. Find out who he is and where he lives, whether there is anything in this new invention of his and, if so, how much he wants for it."

"Why, what can you do with it if you get hold of it?"

"Do with it? Why, don't you see . . ." Mr. Marlini paused as the magnificence of his new idea became more apparent. "If half what these newspapers says is true it means the mastery of the world. If I had that idea of his I could get anything I liked—anything—merely by threatening to use it."

"Blackmail, eh? Sort of ransom?"

"Yeah. Blackmail the whole world."

"Don't touch it, Ed. It's too big."

"Nix. The bigger the better. Anyway, I decide that, not you. You find out what you

THE RAY OF DOOM

can about it. And don't forget that stiff Drury."

"Sure, I'll not forget him, boss."

About a week after this talk with his employer two startling facts became known to Mr. Unwin, and for the first time since his humiliating experience with the lost pearl, he was really happy. By the morning post he had received a letter, written in block capitals upon a sheet of cheap paper. It was short and to the point.

*"Received the sum of £5 with many thanks.
F. Learoyd, alias The Liberator."*

The humorist who had penned this outrageous reminder of Mr. Unwin's darkest hour had gone so far as to comply with the requirements of the law by affixing a twopenny stamp! The recipient's first emotion when he opened it was one of blinding white-hot rage at the memory of his disastrous excursion into the domains of the confidence trick man. He was about to hurl it into the fire when he suddenly realised the full meaning of it. Mr. Learoyd and The Liberator, according to this, were one and the same. This simplified things enormously. Mr. Unwin's threefold quest, which formerly appeared to be hopelessly vague and nebulous, all at once became easier. Instead of being different and diverging investigations, two of his

CHICAGO TAKES A HAND

three problems had suddenly become linked together and reduced to one.

Furthermore, Mr. Unwin had learned the night before from a reliable but disreputable source that Inspector Drury was very much concerned with the case of The Liberator. Here was yet another stroke of luck. The problem of the identity of Mr. Learoyd, undertaken for his own private satisfaction, the quest of The Liberator and the supervision of Inspector Drury, undertaken by command of Ed Marlini, all converged and became crystal clear in comparison with their former obscurity. The next step was obvious. Drury knew more than anybody about The Liberator—or ought to, at any rate. Very good. Unwin wanted Drury and he also wanted The Liberator, in both his capacities. All he had to do was to let Drury do the work and then step in later, if feasible, and reap the rewards. At present the shop assistant appointment could be retained and the evenings devoted to inquiries as to how Drury was progressing. Later perhaps it would be a whole time occupation, in which case Mason & Archer would have to get another shop-walker.

His next report to Chicago was distinctly more hopeful in tone.

CHAPTER IX

THE CARD INDEX

By noon the same day duplicate copies of directories and classified telephone books for the whole country, including London, had arrived at Scotland Yard from the publishers. A staff of twenty detective sergeants, to whom Drury's idea had been explained in full under strictest seal of secrecy, were rapidly going through them and blue pencilling all names to be investigated. Two copies of each book were used to save time, one man marking the odd pages and another confining himself to the even numbers. This work was carried out at a great pace, for in the majority of cases it was obvious at a glance whether a given trade should be included in the list or not.

As soon as the marking of a directory was finished its binding was ruthlessly ripped off and the huge volume split up into sections of fifty pages. Some of these sections were dealt with by Scotland Yard's own staff of clerks and others were sent out to typewriting agencies by special messenger. Each agency was allotted only so much as it could guarantee to finish

THE CARD INDEX

by the following evening at the latest. During the rest of that day and the whole of the next nearly seven hundred typists were hard at work copying out the names and addresses upon thin cards. Each card contained one name only, and at the top the town or district was typed in capital letters to facilitate the work of sorting. There was no special need for secrecy over this part of the work. The copying of endless names and addresses was merely part of the daily routine to the typists, and the fact that it was urgently wanted for the Criminal Investigation Department conveyed nothing to them of its purpose.

The flood of completed cards poured back to Scotland Yard like a rising tide and threatened to engulf the entire building. Every few minutes messenger boys were delivering parcels of them. Others arrived on carrier bicycles, and from the larger agencies van loads at a time came in. All these had to be signed for and unloaded. Two men did nothing else the whole morning but carry bundles of cards from the entrance to the sorting-room. Here another man stationed at the door checked them against a list of towns and districts in order to make sure that none were lost or omitted. Higher and higher grew the stacks on the tables and on the floor of the office where the twenty sergeants strove to cope with them. Their efforts were in vain and they were losing ground, so Drury

THE RAY OF DOOM

hastily collected another ten men to help them. The scene resembled a post office and the sergeants, slow at first, gradually quickened their pace as they grew more familiar with the work, until the sorting was proceeding at a rate which would almost have passed muster at the G.P.O. Drury went in during the morning to see how things were going, and grinned at Leverton, who was working in his shirt sleeves.

"How are you getting on?" he said.

"Pretty well, sir," was the reply. The sergeant tied up a bundle of cards with string as he spoke and tossed it into a basket in front of him. "About four hundred thousand were ready for sending off at eleven o'clock. They're still coming in in shoals but we're keeping almost level with them now."

He pointed to the floor with pride. Save for scattered bundles which had just passed the checker at the door it was almost clear. Only the long tables were still stacked with unsorted cards. Brown paper, cardboard boxes, string and indiarubber bands filled the spaces under the tables, and the waste paper baskets were full of the eviscerated remains of directories. Altogether the scene was most unlike Scotland Yard.

The cards were sorted into police divisions for the metropolitan area and into county, city and borough police districts for the rest of

THE CARD INDEX

the country. Further classification was not attempted at this stage, as it was judged advisable to leave the final arrangement of the cards to the local men who knew their districts. In the meantime orders had gone to the Stationery Office for the printing of letters and instruction sheets to be sent with the cards. At the special request of the Home Office this work was done entirely by old and trusted workmen. Foremen and heads of departments acted as compositors and printers under the immediate supervision of the Deputy Controller and the Director of Publications.

In thirty-six hours the whole enormous task was completed. The last batch of cards was distributed and the completed bundles parcelled up and addressed. Vans then rushed them off to the G.P.O. and they were dispatched by registered post. With each one went a covering letter from the Home Secretary and detailed instructions as to procedure. The Chief Constables of local forces and the Divisional Superintendents of the Metropolitan Police were strictly enjoined to treat the matter as confidential. The investigation was of international importance, and any indiscreet revelation of its purpose might lead to world-wide disaster. Orders were given that the cards were to be re-sorted and arranged geographically into small groups; a man familiar with the locality was to be told off to each one. This was to be done

THE RAY OF DOOM

personally by the chiefs of police and nothing was to be revealed until the time for action arrived. In the case of large cities, where the task was too much for one man to accomplish in the time allotted, permission was given as a special concession for assistance to be rendered by officers not below the rank of superintendent.

At nine o'clock in the morning of the fourth day after the receipt of the cards the nationwide search was to begin. In every town and village in the country all available men were to be paraded at 8 a.m. and instructed in their duties. Thirty thousand men, each armed with his little bundle of cards, were to go round making inquiries, which were to be finished if possible by twelve noon. Every man was also provided with a few blank cards on which could be entered any individual or firm which had escaped the notice of the directory searchers. There were bound to be some omissions; firms which had started business or changed their address since the last revision of the directories, one man businesses which had recently switched over to some other occupation and so on; these were flaws in the scheme with which no central department could possibly deal. It was in the hope of including all these in the meshes of the far-flung net that the order was given to allot men to their own beats as far as practicable.

THE CARD INDEX

Naturally the overwhelming majority of the cards would be returned blank, but it was laid down that any officer whose inquiries elicited anything which might conceivably be of value was to report it forthwith to his superior. Further investigation was to be made immediately in all these cases by the local men, and in addition they were to be reported to the Home Office by telephone or telegraph, even if satisfactorily explained and checked. When zero hour arrived the whole vast machine acted with perfect smoothness and efficiency.

All over the country from Land's End to Thurso the quest went on. Yorkshire policemen, broad of beam and broader of speech, toiled up the precipitous streets of Halifax and a hundred other towns and villages. The Lincolnshire men cycled endless easy miles between straight-cut drainage dykes in the dead flat surface of the fens. Camarvonshire constables with sing-song voices talked alternately in Welsh and English all round their bilingual beats. Among the yellow brick of London and the grey stone of Stamford the search continued. Officers visited the flint-built houses of the Norfolk coast and the concrete repair shops of the Great North Road. Everywhere suave managers and flustered mechanics were trying to remember any unusual work they had done. In hundreds of palatial

THE RAY OF DOOM

offices there was much ringing of bells and consulting of time sheets and job cards, and in thousands of one man businesses there was much pensive head-scratching and bewildered spitting.

To the casual observer nothing out of the ordinary was happening. A large proportion of the men on duty were in plain clothes, and their visits were carried out quickly and unobtrusively. The only sign that any unusual routine was taking place was in rural districts, where unwontedly large numbers of perspiring constables on bicycles might have been noticed by observant motorists.

Before twelve o'clock the earliest reports were beginning to flow in to the Home Office. They were mostly from small police forces in urban areas, in which the visits were not very numerous and in which little travelling was involved. As was expected, most of them drew blank and simply sent in a *nil* return, so that no time had to be spent in following up their cases. A little later reports from rural areas began to come in. These were also nearly all negative, but the mileage travelled by the village constables was considerably greater, so that none of them were finished until noon.

At five minutes past twelve the first positive report came in by telephone from the Divisional Superintendent of G Division, Metropolitan Police. He stated that Police Constable 310

THE CARD INDEX

William Barnes had found a coppersmith who admitted making a metal disc perforated with holes. The use of it was unknown and it had been made from a scale drawing which had fortunately been sent by post. As the customer's address was thus available, the superintendent himself had been round, only to find that the mysterious disc was part of an elaborate model railway system run by an eccentric old gentleman whose one passion in life was railways. The superintendent had actually seen the disc in use and had satisfied himself that the incident was of no importance. The next false alarm came from the Chief Constable of Sheffield, who reported an electrician who had repaired an instrument different from anything he had ever seen before. This was not altogether surprising, for it turned out that it belonged to the physiological department of the University, and was used for some abstruse research into the behaviour of isolated muscle fibres under the influence of various drugs. This was vouched for by the professor of physiology and two of his demonstrators, and could be accepted as accurate.

About one o'clock Bristol weighed in with a story of a bakelite tube made by a wireless engineer for a friend. On further inquiry the friend turned out to be the inventor of a new kind of fountain pen and the bakelite tube was part of his first working model. The inventor was

THE RAY OF DOOM

only too pleased to demonstrate the virtues of his apparatus to the inspector who called upon him; in fact, he wanted to sell him the sole rights in return for a ten per cent. royalty, and so another line of inquiry was definitely written off. Several hundred mare's nests were thus brought to light, and the majority of them were easily explained. There was, however, an appreciable residue which seemed to demand careful examination, and of these the most interesting case was that of Bill Hirst's garage. Bill, who had been located with difficulty by the visiting constable (for he was still in bed when that officer arrived at his workshop) had disclosed much valuable information about a certain Mr. Playfair. The latter, it appeared, had been in the habit of ordering special fitments to be made at frequent intervals during the last ten years. He had always paid for them, though sometimes after considerable delay and with many grumbles at their cost. Not, Bill was careful to explain, because his charges were excessive, but because the parts themselves, whatever they were, generally turned out to be useless, although they were always made strictly to Mr. Playfair's specifications. Lately, however, Bill's client had appeared to be more satisfied with his purchases, so much so that he had ordered three more copies of his last batch of fitments to be made at a cost of thirty pounds a set. These had been delivered several days

THE CARD INDEX

before and paid for on the spot. Bill mentioned this because it was such a departure from Mr. Playfair's usual habit of demanding several months' credit. He had never explained exactly what he was doing with them, but Bill gathered that it was wireless work of some sort or other. Also Mr. Playfair had thrown out hints and suggestions that he was on the verge of a very important discovery, which would make him famous.

This was all very vague, and might be susceptible of some perfectly ordinary and innocent explanation, but it seemed to Drury to be the most promising of all the reports which had yet come in, so he went down to Bill Hirst's garage himself. The proprietor, who had already given Mr. Playfair's address and description to his previous visitor, had nothing to add to his former statement, with one very important exception. Since the constable's departure Mr. Playfair himself had been in to collect a re-charged accumulator and he had seemed to be considerably upset. He asked Bill if he had heard about the police search, which by this time was becoming common property and a source of gossip, and when Bill told him that information about his special fitments was already in their hands he seemed most disturbed—"struck all of a heap" was Bill's expression. He had then left in a great hurry only about half an hour before Drury's arrival.

THE RAY OF DOOM

The inspector wasted no more time, but set out at once for Mr. Playfair's house. He had already taken the precaution to obtain a search warrant.

When he got to No. 4, Laburnum Terrace there was no reply to his knock. He repeated it, louder this time, and waited a while. Still no answer, so he tried the door; it swung open and he went inside. Everywhere were evidences of a hurried departure. A half-finished meal was on the table in the kitchen, with the teapot still quite respectably warm and some bacon-fat on one of the plates not yet fully congealed. Coats and hats were strewn about on the floor under the pegs in the passage. Upstairs drawers and cupboards were open and some of their contents on the carpet. To the unskilled eye it looked like a burglary, but Drury thought otherwise. Burglars usually adopt one of two methods. Either they work very neatly and unobtrusively, taking what they want and leaving everything else undisturbed, or else they ransack the whole place in a carefully careless way to make sure that nothing is missed.

The state of affairs which confronted Drury was something midway between the two. Drawers had been left open and untidy, but they had not been emptied bodily on to the floor. Their appearance suggested somebody packing in a great hurry rather than a random

THE CARD INDEX

search. Also various small articles which a burglar would certainly have taken were untouched. There was nothing of any great value, but there was a nine-carat gold bracelet on the mantelpiece and a purse with thirty shillings in it in the half-open top drawer of the dressing table.

In the front room downstairs, which was the next to be examined, Drury found a large desk, the best bit of furniture in the whole house. Leaning up against the side of it was a thick newspaper cutting book. The inspector flicked it open casually, more out of curiosity than anything else, and saw, neatly pasted in, a complete collection of newspaper articles referring to *The Liberator*.

This was decidedly intriguing. Of course, anyone is entitled to collect newspaper cuttings on any subject under the sun. Many people do it as a hobby; others, such as free lance journalists and librarians in large newspaper offices, do it as part of their daily work. Still, taken in conjunction with other things it was suggestive.

Drury put down the book and opened the top left hand drawer, which was unlocked. It contained a bank passbook and a bunch of keys. Taking up the former he looked through the recent entries with a slight quickening of the pulse—for he had read up the case very thoroughly and remembered something which might . . .

THE RAY OF DOOM

Yes, there it was. Mr. Playfair and The Liberator were almost certainly one and the same person. For under the date April 4th, the day following The Liberator's broadcast speech, was a credit entry for fifteen hundred pounds, paid by the United Press Ltd., the owners of the *Daily Wire* and scores of other papers. A visit to United House would soon verify that and possibly even yield a description of Mr. Playfair. Bill Hirst's description had been singularly vague and unsatisfactory, for Bill was a dreamy and unobservant individual.

Drury next took possession of the keys. One of them he recognised at once as the property of the South British Safe Deposit Company. So that was where The Liberator kept his secrets. He must indeed have left in a hurry to have forgotten it. The inspector realised immediately that the house could not be left for a moment. Here, under his very hands, was the fountain head of the trouble which had stirred the nation to its depths, and no risks could be taken with it. Information of priceless value might have been left behind, and for all he knew. The Liberator might be on the watch, ready to slip back into the house the moment it was left unguarded. He looked out of the window into Laburnum Terrace. It was quite deserted except for one small boy playing in the road.

THE CARD INDEX

"Here, sonny. Do you want to earn sixpence?" The safety of The Liberator's house was cheap at the price.

"Yes, mister." There was no mistaking the eagerness of the reply.

"Well, hop off and tell the first policeman you see to come here at once. Give him this card. If you come back with him I'll give you the money."

CHAPTER X

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

THE day on which Drury's card index scheme justified its immense cost in time and trouble was a Saturday—the 19th of April, to be exact. But there was no prospect of a week end off duty for the inspector. It rather looked as though the next few days were going to be the busiest of all his working life. The house in Laburnum Terrace had to be thoroughly searched from roof to cellar, which would take several hours, and it was already nearly six o'clock. Mr. Playfair's transactions with the Safe Deposit Company had to be gone into in detail and Drury anticipated some delay here, for the place was sure to be closed.

As soon as the small boy had earned his sixpence by piloting an outsized constable into Number 4, Drury went in search of a telephone. He first rang up the Safe Deposit Company in the faint hope that there might be a resident caretaker who could tell him the address of the manager. He did not really expect to get any reply at all, and was considerably astonished when the voice at the other end

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

of the wire turned out to be the manager himself speaking.

"Come round any time you like," he said. "I shall be here until midnight in any case."

This seemed distinctly unusual but highly satisfactory, as it would save a considerable amount of trouble. The inspector then rang up Scotland Yard and reported his discoveries. Two men would be sent immediately, he was told, and might be expected to arrive in half an hour. Also Chief Constable McCarthy had left instructions that he was to be notified if any results materialised from the reports which came in after he went off duty, so in all probability he would be coming as well.

Drury went back to the house and began to look round again with renewed interest. The Safe Deposit would have to wait. The front bedroom was the only one in actual use at Number 4, Laburnum Terrace. The other room, which faced on to the tiny back garden, was fitted up as a sort of workshop. Tables and shelves were full of electrical and wireless apparatus. Coils of flex, switches, valves and batteries were scattered about everywhere. Drury did not know much about wireless, so he left these alone until they could be examined by experts. He was unable to say whether they were ordinary fittings purchased from stock and used for conventional wireless sets or whether they were really more interesting and important.

THE RAY OF DOOM

One thing he did notice, however, was the presence of a large number of bacteriological culture tubes such as he had often seen in his visits to Sir James Martin's laboratory. There was no mistaking those test-tubes with their cotton wool plugs and sloping surfaces of agar and gelatine. Presumably they had been used by The Liberator in his experiments. Also there was a rough notebook on the table which appeared to contain records of tests carried out. It was ruled into columns, which were headed Time of Exposure, Voltage, Distance, and Result. As far as Drury could make out The Liberator had been trying to find the exact strength of his apparatus. The columns of figures were arranged in a definite, orderly manner. On the first page the exposure and the voltage were kept constant, and the distances gradually increased by steps of twenty yards. The results column was full of plus signs until four hundred yards was reached, but from this onwards only minus signs appeared. Probably it was to this page that The Liberator had referred when he first described the unexpected and surprising power of his rays. Drury turned over and scanned the next sheet of the laboratory log book. Here the voltage was four times as great and the effective range extended to twice the distance with the same exposure.

At the end of the book was a page of

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

pencilled notes which seemed to summarise The Liberator's deductions from his experiments. It ran as follows :

"The range increases directly in proportion to the voltage and decreases inversely in proportion to the square of the distance. The lethal effect increases in proportion to the length of the exposure and is definitely cumulative. Therefore the world can be sterilised with moderate power."

Presently the Chief Constable and his men arrived and the local officer was dismissed with thanks for his assistance and a note to explain his absence from his beat. McCarthy congratulated Drury heartily and without envy, for he was a man who never attempted to appropriate his subordinates' successes. This is a vice to which some highly-placed officials are incurably addicted ; it may add to their reputation, but it certainly detracts from their popularity and from the keenness and efficiency of the men who are unfortunate enough to be under their control.

McCarthy began to explore the house with great enthusiasm and seemed likely to spend the night there. At his suggestion Drury left him to it and went off to get some supper. He had had an extremely busy day—quarter of an hour for lunch and no tea at all—and

THE RAY OF DOOM

was beginning to feel that he must have some food. It is only the detective of fiction who can follow the trail for days on end without food or sleep. His less spectacular colleague of real life must stop for both occasionally, however important his mission.

On his way home Drury committed one of the gravest indiscretions of his career. It can only be urged in extenuation that he was hungry and tired at the time, and not quite so alert as usual. Also he was very excited at the progress which had been made so far in solving a really difficult problem. It is hardly to be wondered at, therefore, that when he happened to meet Sergeant Leverton returning from a football match on the same bus, he told him all about the afternoon's events and about his proposed visit to the Safe Deposit. The indiscretion referred to consisted, not in revealing these things to the sergeant, but in doing so on the top of a bus.

Leverton was interested—as well he might be. But the man in the next seat was still more interested—for he was devoting his weekend to the sole purpose of finding out what the inspector was doing. It was, in fact, none other than our old friend Mr. Unwin, Ed Marlini's emissary from Chicago, who had no hesitation in following Drury, because he was not known to the police. He had selected the next seat as soon as he saw the inspector in

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

conversation with a friend, hoping to catch some small fragments of useful information, but not really expecting to do so. He could hardly believe his stupendous luck when he heard what was said, and his opinion of Scotland Yard was lowered considerably by Drury's lapse from prudence. Of course The Liberator's name was never mentioned in connection with Laburnum Terrace and the Safe Deposit, but it was quite evident to Mr. Unwin, with his knowledge of the case, to whom the inspector was referring.

By the time the latter had been home, washed and had supper it was half past nine, so he took the tube to Chancery Lane, which was the nearest station to the huge building which housed the vaults of the South British Safe Deposit Company, Ltd. McCarthy had brought along the necessary documentary authority and handed it over to him, so he anticipated no trouble in probing still deeper into The Liberator's affairs.

The building was in darkness save for one window on the ground floor, but the front gate was open. Drury went in and made his way towards the lighted room. He knocked on one or two doors before discovering the right one, because the light was not visible from the passages. Eventually he found himself in the presence of Mr. George Harrison, the manager. He explained who he was and

THE RAY OF DOOM

what he wanted, and produced his warrant. Mr. Harrison was most courteous and helpful and waved aside Drury's apologies for arriving at such an hour on Saturday evening.

"It doesn't matter in the least, my dear sir. I have to be here in any case. You see I'm going to be married on Monday and I'm trying to get everything straightened up so that I can leave the place for a fortnight without being disturbed by business affairs. Beastly nuisance spoiling a week-end, but it's better than interrupting a honeymoon."

Drury agreed, with mental reservations about the week-end. His personal opinion was that people who grumble about working on a Saturday, especially when they are doing it for their own convenience, don't know they are born. They probably got every week-end off anyway, and he considered that all people so favoured were doing a part-time job only. Other detectives and all doctors will appreciate his feelings in this matter. He kept these thoughts to himself though, for he had no wish to antagonise the manager.

"What can I do for you?" repeated the urbane Mr. Harrison.

"I want to open the safe belonging to this key," said Drury, producing the bunch which he had found in Mr. Playfair's desk. The manager took it and looked at the number stamped on the metal.

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

"That's not a safe key. It's for a deed box which is kept in one of our strong rooms. If you come down with me we can bring it up here for you to examine. It'll need two of us to carry it. All keys lettered 'A' belong to big boxes."

Mr. Harrison led the way down endless corridors and steps, switching on lights as he went, until further progress was barred by an immense steel door.

"This is our number 2 strong room," he explained. "For customers who want their things to be safe at a moderate charge. If your man had chosen the number 1 room we shouldn't have been able to get at it to-night. There are six barred gates on the corridors before you get to the door itself, and they've all got time-locks which are set every evening so that even we can't open them during the night. The strong room itself is a bit more up to date than this one. It has a six-foot layer of concrete round it outside the plating and the concrete is reinforced with old railway lines. We claim that nothing on earth can damage it or open it when shut. Of course the rents there are more expensive. But this one is good enough for most things. It has twelve inches of steel and three feet of concrete round it."

While he was speaking Mr. Harrison was unlocking the ponderous door. It swung slowly

THE RAY OF DOOM

back on its well-oiled hinges as he heaved his weight upon the massive handle. He turned a switch and the shadowy interior was flooded with light. Row upon row of tin boxes were stored on steel racks round the walls, each one lettered in white with a number and the owner's name. The manager stepped over the raised threshold and went to one of the racks. With an effort he lifted down a box about the size of a small travelling trunk and put it down on the floor. He then dragged it along to the door and Drury helped him to lift it out into the corridor. Mr. Harrison shut and locked the strong room and the two men carried the box back to the office.

"Well, there you are," said Mr. Harrison, straightening himself with a sigh of relief. "You've got the key, haven't you? Will you go through it while I get on with my own work?"

He went back to his desk and continued his tidying up. It was now half past ten, and two large overflowing wastepaper baskets bore witness to his industry prior to Drury's arrival. Very few papers remained to be weeded out and only a few more letters to write. Mr. Harrison's last working day of bachelor freedom was rapidly drawing to a close. He looked at his calendar for the hundredth time, as school-boys look at it when the end of term approaches, for he was very much in love.

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

He was not at all sorry to have the inspector's company, because it had been a dull evening. He had been quite alone. Every other occupant of the immense building had long since gone home, and it would remain untenanted and deserted until the caretaker paid his visit the next morning. At least, that is what Mr. Harrison thought, but in actual fact the building was not quite so deserted as he imagined. Mr. Unwin had waited outside Drury's house while he was having supper and had taken the precaution of doing so in a taxi. As soon as Drury emerged to catch his tube train Mr. Unwin's taxi slid off into the traffic and got to Chancery Lane before him. It is much better and less conspicuous to go on ahead when shadowing a person rather than to lurk furtively behind him, and it is particularly easy to do this when the destination is known.

Mr. Unwin dismissed his taxi and waited round a convenient corner until he heard footsteps coming down the street. One glance revealed Drury's back disappearing through the front door. The watcher gave him thirty seconds grace and followed, his rubber shoes making no sound on the concrete corridors. A small lobby near the dark and silent lift shaft provided a good hiding-place, and Mr. Unwin thankfully availed himself of it. It smelt strongly of metal polish and was uncomfortably full of cleaning materials, but

THE RAY OF DOOM

there was just room to stand upright and close the door.

While Mr. Harrison was finishing off his letters Drury was going through the contents of his precious box systematically. They were mostly newspapers referring to The Liberator and his work. Apparently Mr. Playfair was very proud of his press notices and thought it worth while to keep a duplicate set of them under lock and key. There were no plans or drawings of apparatus. Either the inventor had removed them or more probably, in his insane jealousy, he had never kept copies lest his secret be seen by other eyes than his own. The only other thing in the box was a map of the world. On it were drawn several small circles in red ink, one in England, one in New Zealand, one in South America and one in Japan. On the back of the map were columns of figures arranged in groups of five. Probably, thought Drury, a plan of The Liberator's world campaign, though its meaning was not apparent. The inspector pocketed the map and bundled all the rest of the contents back into the box and locked it.

"Finished," he said as he stood up.

"Good," said Mr. Harrison, going to the door and propping it open. "So have I. Are you going to take the box away?"

"No, not now. It can stop here for the present. There's nothing in it of any use."

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

Drury's words echoed down the empty passages and the gratified Mr. Unwin heard them distinctly in his cubby hole.

"Right, let's put it back again."

The little procession once more filed slowly along the corridor and down the steps with the big box hanging between them. It is surprising how heavy a trunkful of folded newspapers can be. The door of the lobby by the lift shaft opened silently and Mr. Unwin emerged, blinking in the light of the unshaded lamps. He tiptoed carefully down the steps, mentally blessing their fireproofness, which meant an entire absence of creaking floorboards, and peered cautiously round the iron pillar at the bottom of the staircase. Drury and the manager were just lifting the box into the strong room.

Mr. Unwin's eyes lit up with a vicious and merciless gleam and he braced his muscles like a sprinter at the start of a race. Chuck Kelly had been a friend of his. Besides he had Marlini's instructions. . . . It would have been very enlightening for Miss Bates if she had been able to see his face at this moment. The fact that Mr. Harrison, a total stranger and a man against whom he bore no grudge whatever, was about to suffer as well as the inspector, troubled him not at all. Mr. Unwin had held for a time the highly-paid but precarious post of chief gunman to Mr. Al Higgins, deceased,

THE RAY OF DOOM

and lacked discrimination in these matters. The habit of using a machine gun in crowded city streets is apt to make one somewhat careless of consequences.

There was a scratching noise as the heavy tin box was dragged along the floor. The scratching stopped, and bent backs were visible for a moment as the box swung into the air and hung over a vacant place in the rack. There was a soft padding sound as flying feet came racing down the short corridor. Mr. Unwin caught hold of the handle of the door and pushed with all his strength. For a moment he thought it was too much for him, and then it began to move. A swish of displaced air whistled past him as the huge mass of metal gathered speed, followed by a soft thud and a metallic click. Mr. Unwin turned the handle carefully down until he felt the bolts just engage in their sockets. Then he polished it with his handkerchief. The key he did not touch, for doors may swing shut by accident but they never turn their own keys. This was the sort of task which Mr. Unwin was in the habit of carrying out neatly and efficiently without leaving any loose ends sticking out. It is not fair to assess his competence by his behaviour in the Learoyd affair, which was of a subtlety altogether foreign to his ruthlessly direct nature. He made his way to the foot of the stairs without a backward glance.

THE DANGEROUS SAFE

"That's put you where you belong, Mr. Inspector Drury," he said as he turned the corner. He stopped dead as he spoke and his heart missed several beats, for there on the fourth step up was a man, and there was a blue glitter of steel in his right hand.

THE RAY OF DOOM

A DETECTIVE NOVEL

**BY
W. STANLEY SYKES**

**HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LONDON**

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. HIRST'S GARAGE - - - - -	II
II. FRESH IDEAS - - - - -	20
III. THE LIBERATOR SPEAKS - - - - -	38
IV. COINCIDENCE OR . . . ? - - - - -	53
V. FIRSTFRUITS - - - - -	62
VI. THE MEETING OF THE CABINET - - - - -	79
VII. DRURY HAS AN IDEA - - - - -	110
VIII. CHICAGO TAKES A HAND - - - - -	121
IX. THE CARD INDEX - - - - -	138
X. THE DANGEROUS SAFE - - - - -	152
XI. ENTER THE O.G.P.U. - - - - -	166
XII. THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT - - - - -	182
XIII. THE FINAL MESSAGE - - - - -	193
XIV. THE CODE MESSAGE - - - - -	207
XV. THE SÉANCE - - - - -	229
XVI. THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH - - - - -	262
XVII. NONT SARAH'S - - - - -	277

CHAPTER XI

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

MR. ALEXANDER ANDREWS spoke perfect English, and no one would have guessed that his real name was Alexis Andreiev. No one, that is, who had not the privilege of reading his correspondence, some of which was very interesting.

He had recently received a letter in a cheap commercial envelope—the type of letter, to outward appearances, which the post office deals with in millions every day. Its contents were less ordinary than its covering, for the first sheet was headed “Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik,” which being interpreted means the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and it was signed by no less a person than Michael Ivanovitch Petrovsky, chief of the O.G.P.U., that ill-omened institution which has achieved the impossible and outrivalled the Tcheka, its predecessor under the Tsarist regime, for tyranny and brutality.

Comrade, it ran, the Five Year Plan progresses favourably on the whole, but it is

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

badly handicapped in some ways. The Soviet Union cannot carry it out in its entirety, we regret to say, without the aid of capitalist countries. This aid we must have for the time being until the Soviet Union can stand alone and lead the way to the overthrow of capitalism and the bourgeoisie in all countries by means of a world revolution.

Owing to fear and political prejudice, combined with economic and financial difficulties we find it impossible to get the necessary assistance. It is your high duty, therefore, to serve the Union as no man has ever served it before by obtaining for us The Liberator or his apparatus, or both. Once in possession of these we can dictate our own terms to the capitalist countries by the threat of world sterilisation. The new dam at Dniepostrov will ensure an unlimited supply of electric power for this purpose.

All your other work must be instantly abandoned and you are to make every effort to carry out these instructions. All the information available at present is that Detective-Inspector Drury is in charge of the search for the Liberator at present being conducted by the British Government. The O.G.P.U. will at once advise you if any further data become available, but it is anticipated that you will have to rely on your own efforts. The O.G.P.U. does not expect its servants to fail.

THE RAY OF DOOM

Mr. Andrews, stimulated by the sting in the tail of this letter, had gone so far as to rent and occupy a house next door to the one in which Inspector Drury lived, and for more than ten days had been keeping an unobtrusive eye upon him. He had even made friendly—but not too friendly—overtures across the garden fence, after the manner of next-door neighbours. His perfect knowledge of English had been attained by long residence in this country, and he was certain that his speech would not betray him.

For many years, until the revolutionary Government of his native land offered him an assured income in return for services rendered—services of various kinds, some less reputable than others, and all of them of the nature of espionage—Mr. Andrews had picked up a living in many peculiar ways. He had attained considerable eminence on the music-hall stage as the Great Spanzoni in his Sensational Knife-Throwing Act. He was really expert at this, and never had difficulty in securing engagements. The British public likes to have vicarious thrills, and to sit in a plush-covered arm-chair watching the spangled and athletic figure of Mr. Andrews hurling knives with incredible skill and speed was an experience which drew full houses night after night. Up to a range of twenty feet Mr. Andrews's aim was almost as accurate as that of a rifleman. He could take a dozen gleaming steel blades and throw

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

them one after the other so quickly that two were in the air at once and every one would hit its target, which usually consisted of playing cards pinned to a board. Towards the end of his turn Mr. Andrews grew more sensational. He juggled with his knives as if they were harmless tennis balls, keeping five or six of them flashing and glittering in the air together. And there was no deception. They were real knives, sharp and heavy, with long blades and sharp cutting edges. Any member of the audience was at liberty to test or inspect them in any way he pleased—and to juggle with them if he liked.

For the sake of effect a first-aid box and a tourniquet were prominently displayed on the stage during his act, to emphasise its dangerous nature. But they were never needed, for a knife in Mr. Andrews's hands ceased to be a dead and inanimate piece of steel and became a living and sentient being, obeying the commands of its master to a hair's breadth. Sensationalism apart, it was a fine exhibition and would have been a clever performance with harmless weapons. There was beauty in the sheer rhythm and smoothness of it, in the accuracy with which each knife flew to its appointed place, in the dexterity with which they were thrown and the effortless ease with which they were caught. The Great Spanzoni's confidence in his skill and muscular co-ordination

THE RAY OF DOOM

was so supreme that he could even juggle with his knives for a short time blindfolded. An astounding feat, but not so incredible as it sounds after seeing the perfection of his performance. The knives as they flew through the air seemed to move as though they were on rails, with never a suggestion of variation from their appointed orbits. They had the inevitability of the stars in their courses, and one felt that it did not matter in the least whether he was looking at them or not.

Lastly came the famous Halo of Steel. To a roll of drums a large gold-painted wooden screen was brought in and placed with some ceremony in the centre of the stage. A girl in a bathing-dress stood against it and the orchestra faded into silence with a final brazen crash.

Mr. Andrews nonchalantly tucked a bundle of knives under his left arm and bowed to the audience. Turning, he began to throw. Flash after flash as the weapons flew through the air, each one with sufficient power and weight behind it to impale the girl like a beetle on a pin; thud after thud as they struck the wooden screen and stuck quivering, with their gleaming ivory handles almost touching her. It was all over in a few seconds, and she stepped forward with a smile from a frame of knives.

Mr. Andrews's stage career ended abruptly. He arrived at the theatre one evening for the first house of a twice-nightly show feeling more

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

cheerful and more confident than ever before. He felt that he could easily surpass all his former achievements. Fortunately for his assistant, who was even at that moment putting on her bathing dress, the manager noticed his cheerfulness and made a correct diagnosis, being assisted at close quarters by the alcoholic odour of Mr. Andrews's breath. He flatly forbade the act to go on, in spite of the very considerable monetary loss the decision involved. Mr. Andrews stormed and raved, and ended by threatening him with his knives. This finished his stage career for good.

Being a resourceful man he was not out of employment for long. He became a spiritualistic medium, and soon built up a great reputation. He never failed to produce results, for he had had the opportunity of watching numerous conjurers and magicians from the wings during his stage career, and of talking to them and learning from them during intervals between performances. And if it is possible to deceive an audience in the full glare of the footlights, as it certainly is, it is very much easier to do the same thing in a semi-darkened room. It was child's play to Mr. Andrews.

A great point in his favour, from his clients' point of view, was his cheerful readiness to submit to investigation by prominent scientists who dabbled in spiritualism. This was acclaimed on all sides as a proof of his transparent honesty

THE RAY OF DOOM

and sincerity. As a matter of fact, he found that scientific investigators were as easy to deceive as anybody else. That was why he welcomed them, for the seal of their easily-gained approval enhanced his reputation considerably.

It is a dearly cherished and indestructible illusion that scientists, generally elderly, almost certainly shortsighted, very often somewhat deaf, and always entirely ignorant of the theory and practice of conjuring, are fit and proper persons to expose the tricks of fraudulent mediums. As a matter of fact the more eminent the scientist the more useless he is for this particular purpose. Eminence in any one branch of knowledge is gained by intensive specialised work at it, which necessarily implies a greater or less neglect of other subjects. This explains the notorious helplessness of learned men when confronted with problems outside their own special subjects. A professor of psychology may know how to decarbonise the engine of his car, but the chances that he does are inversely proportional to his eminence as a psychologist. If he is really world-famous he probably cannot even drive the car safely.

An expert conjurer is the proper person to test mediums for fraud, because trickery is his life study. Throw in a few scientists as well, if you like, to make up the vigilance committee. They can amuse themselves by making tests to prove that the medium has not got an

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

X-ray apparatus on the other side of the wall by which he produces his spirit photographs, but the conjurer alone is the man to do the real work. He is the only man who knows how to get out of a tied and sealed sack without breaking the seals, who knows how to write messages on the inaccessible sides of slates which have been locked together, and who knows how to read the contents of letters without opening their envelopes.*

What would the professors say if their work was to be judged by a music-hall artist? Something pungent, no doubt. And yet they themselves have the hardihood to pose as experts in the conjurer's department, about which they know nothing whatever.

On the fateful Saturday evening when Mr. Unwin, gunman and temporary shop assistant, followed Inspector Drury to the South British Safe Deposit, Mr. Andrews, late Andreiev, was also following him. The Soviet agent had even less to go upon than Ed. Marlini's henchman. All he knew was contained in the letter from the O.G.P.U. Drury was his sole and only clue, for naturally he knew nothing about Mr. Learoyd, and he had not had the good fortune to overhear the conversation on the bus top. The quest of The Liberator seemed to him a hopeless task, unless Drury, backed by the organisation of Scotland Yard, could point the

* See "The Missing Moneylender."

THE RAY OF DOOM

way. For an individual it was impossible, and Mr. Andrews was seriously perturbed about it, for he knew that the O.G.P.U. would show him no mercy if he failed them.

He followed Mr. Unwin into the Safe Deposit building, but stopped in the vestibule, for he was not wearing rubber shoes and the passages seemed to be hard and noisy concrete. He found that he could see very well through the glass swing doors, so he was not at any serious disadvantage. He arrived just in time to see his predecessor hide in the lobby near the lift. This puzzled him considerably. He had thought at first that Mr. Unwin was another Scotland Yard officer, although he could not imagine why the two men did not keep together. It was now evident that this was not the case, and Andrews realised for the first time that someone else besides himself was on the trail of the inspector. As far as he could see, there were only two reasons why the unknown should be doing this. He might be a criminal who bore a grudge against the police officer; but Mr. Andrews had been long enough in England to know that detectives, like judges, are often threatened but never attacked in cold blood. The only alternative was that the other man was on the same mission as himself and trying to locate the mysterious Liberator by following the official agent. The fact that he had hidden himself seemed to favour the latter theory.

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

If private vengeance was his object, why wait until the inspector was safely within earshot of that lighted room at the end of the passage? Surely the solitude of Chancery Lane at ten o'clock on Saturday evening or the dark porch of the building itself would have been chosen for such an attack.

Time passed on, and Andrews, from his post behind the doors, saw the deed box carried downstairs by Mr. Harrison and the inspector; saw also the stealthy figure which followed them. The corridors and stairs were now brightly illuminated, and Andrews noticed that down their centres ran narrow strips of carpet, which had been invisible before Mr. Harrison switched on the lights. As a matter of fact, it was not really carpet at all, for the South British Safe Deposit prided itself above all things on its fireproofness, and such combustible material as carpet would not be tolerated for a moment; it was asbestos matting, which had recently been put down to deaden the sound of passing footsteps. Andrews tested it cautiously and found that he could walk without making any noise, so he stole along the passage and down the steps to see what was happening. He was just in time to see Mr. Unwin slam the door of the strong room. That settled one question conclusively. The unknown certainly had no connection with Scotland Yard, except as an opponent. Mr.

THE RAY OF DOOM

Andrews looked thoughtful. He cared not at all for the men entombed in the strong room, but he cared very much indeed for the success of his own investigations. He had to decide quickly what to do. The man who was just closing the bolts of the huge green door was evidently dangerous, and Mr. Andrews's thoughts flew at once to his favourite weapon.

He drew a large penknife from his pocket, opened it and weighed it tentatively in his hand. It was a poor substitute for the beautifully balanced weapons with which he could do such marvellous feats on the stage, but it would have to serve in the absence of a better. The gunman feverishly turned down the handle, cleaned it, and dashed across to the steps.

"Stop just where you are," said a calm voice above him. "Stick 'em up quick. I can throw this faster than you can shoot and I don't miss."

The horrified gunman saw the blue gleam of the electric light on a four-inch blade, poised in an unpleasantly workmanlike manner in a very steady hand. His arms went up at once.

"Get back to the level," was the next order, and Mr. Unwin retreated down a couple of steps.

"Now lie down on your face and keep your hands away from your pockets."

Having got his opponent into a thoroughly disadvantageous position, Andrews approached and ran his hands over his hips and side pockets.

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

"Turn over." Mr. Unwin had the humiliation of being searched by the left hand of this dangerous-looking man. The right hand with its murderous knife remained aloft and ready for instant action.

"This guy sure knows what he's doing," thought Mr. Unwin. In rapid succession all his pockets were felt, then his armpits and the legs of his trousers. No conceivable hiding place for a gun was overlooked or neglected.

"Now get up." Mr. Unwin scrambled to his feet and looked resentfully at his dusty clothes. On one point he was greatly relieved. In the first surprise and shock of discovery he had thought for one horrible moment that he had repeated Chuck Kelly's blunder, but now he was somewhat reassured. Whoever this guy was, he didn't look like a plain-clothes cop and didn't behave like one. Cops don't go round flourishing nasty-looking knives. It was annoying that he should be snooping round and spoiling the most refined accident ever staged, but there was at least the consolation that he was unofficial, probably a crook himself.

"I could have told you I hadn't got a gun," remarked Mr. Unwin conversationally. "Only you wouldn't have believed it." Warned by the untimely fate of Chuck Kelly, he had never carried a gun since he landed at Liverpool. Mr. Andrews ignored this pleasantry.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"What are you doing here?" he said curtly.

"I like that," was the reply. "What are you doing here yourself? It isn't exactly a public parking place. I guess I'm on the same lay as you—looking round trying to pick up a bit of unearned wealth."

Mr. Unwin was a quick thinker and was now quite certain that he was in no danger of arrest. Still, even if the fellow with the knife was a crook it would be best to keep quiet about the strong room and its doomed inhabitants. Perhaps he hadn't seen anything—he seemed to be half-way up the stairs at the time. No use laying oneself open to blackmail. But the stranger's next words shattered his illusions.

"What did you shut him in for?"

This was an embarrassingly direct question and Mr. Unwin knew not what to reply. He had never felt the lack of a gun so acutely in all his life. If he'd only had his favourite automatic he'd have shown this chap whether a bullet travels faster than a knife or not. As a last resource he decided to tell the truth, mainly because he could not think of any other story quickly enough to be convincing.

"Well, if you must know, he killed a pal of mine."

"I don't believe it," snapped the other.

"Honest, he did. Not by himself, of course, but he got him hung."

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

"Ah, that's quite likely, if it was a friend of yours. He made a great mistake in not hanging you as well."

Mr. Andreiev was always blunt of speech even to the point of brutality, and never permitted himself to be restrained by the fear of hurting other people's feelings.

"And," went on Mr. Unwin, whose arms were beginning to ache and who wanted to close the interview, "I'm looking for The Liberator, and I've got all that chap knows, so I don't want him any more." He jerked his head towards the strong room as he spoke.

Andrews's eyes lit up with new interest. So he had been right in his conjecture after all.

"I'll make a bargain with you," he said. "I want The Liberator too, and if you can tell me what you know and come in with me I won't say anything about this—er—accident. If you don't, I'll walk you out of here and whistle for the police."

This was an astounding piece of luck from his point of view. To get all that Drury knew, and in addition to have an accomplice who was absolutely in his power, was an excellent start. He could squeeze him dry and use him as long as he was useful and then—get rid of him. Working for the O.G.P.U. had inevitably blunted any scruples which the not-too-scrupulous

THE RAY OF DOOM

Mr. Andrews originally possessed. His ideas on the value of life—other than his own—were on much the same level as those of Mr. Unwin.

"I'll tell you everything, bo," went on the Chicago man. It was a big stroke of luck for him also, and he was quick to realise it. Nothing more would be said about the present awkward situation, and any subsequent attempts at blackmail could be countered by Chicago methods. He wasn't going to be caught without a gun again. No, sir, he would as soon think of forgetting his trousers. The future was not worrying Mr. Unwin at all. He felt he could deal with that very adequately, so long as he got away from Chancery Lane a free man.

"Right. Come along out of this. You go first." Andrews pointed to the stairs with the knife blade. Mr. Unwin hesitated.

"What about those guys in there? I only meant it for a joke."

"Let 'em stop," was the callous reply. "And don't start telling funny stories. Meant it for a joke, did you? Yes, I can see you going back to let 'em out. It'd be so easy to explain, wouldn't it?"

It was once more brought home to Mr. Unwin that his late opponent—now partner—was by no means a fool. He went up the stairs in silence. When they arrived at the front entrance he was permitted to lower his arms.

ENTER THE O.G.P.U.

No one was in sight, so the Soviet agent carefully led the way into Chancery Lane. As he did so he shut the door behind him, thus cutting off all hope that the prisoners of the strong room might be accidentally discovered and released by a passing policeman.

"Come along home with me," he said, and Mr. Unwin, outwardly obedient, followed him without a word.

CHAPTER XII

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

DRURY and Mr. Harrison dropped the deed box the last few inches on to the rack when they heard the thud and click of the closing door.

"What the hell . . . ?" began Mr. Harrison. He crossed the room and pushed hard on the steel plating. Nothing happened. He looked at its edge where the inner plates of the door met the girders of the framework and saw that it was fitting tightly all round.

"Do you know," he said slowly, "this damned door's shut and we can't get out!"

"Looks like it," agreed Drury. "Let's both push."

They did so, but there was a dead, unyielding feel about it which soon stopped them.

"Can we get at the bolts?"

"No, they're boxed in. You can't even see them."

"Well, then, we can't do anything except wait. Somebody will come and let us out some time."

"Yes, the caretaker comes in on Sunday

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

mornings. But, dash it all, it's a bit thick having to spend the whole night here."

Drury nodded feelingly. He would never hear the last of this at the Yard. Well, they would have to make the best of a bad job. He took out his cigarette-case and passed it across.

"Thanks," said Mr. Harrison, and presently two glowing sparks of red proclaimed that they were making the best of it.

Suddenly the manager sprang to his feet with a cry of horror and dismay. He dropped his cigarette, dashed across to the door and hammered upon it with his fists like a maniac. He might as well have attempted to dismantle the Great Pyramid with a tack hammer. He staggered back and sat down on a deed box, his head buried in his bruised and bleeding hands.

"What on earth's the matter? Pull yourself together, man," said Drury sharply. He had no wish to spend the night listening to hysterical outbursts. "It's a damned nuisance, but there's no need to go off the deep end like that about it."

"It's airtight!" gasped Mr. Harrison, looking up with fear in his eyes.

"Airtight!" Mr. Harrison pointed dumbly to the door. "Good Lord!" There was a tense silence.

"I wonder how long the air will last?" said Drury at last in an abstracted tone. "No

THE RAY OF DOOM

need to use it up unnecessarily, anyhow." He dropped his cigarette on the floor and trod on it.

"I know how long it will last," was the unexpected reply. "Let's work it out. I wonder if there's a chance. . . . A few years ago Professor Markham, the physiologist, was one of our clients, and he deposited some property in this room. I remember he remarked at the time that he wouldn't like to be shut up in it, and he worked out on the back of an envelope how long the air would last just as a matter of interest."

"Well, how long would it last?" burst out the practical-minded Drury, who was listening impatiently.

"It was a complicated calculation," went on the methodical Mr. Harrison, not to be hurried in his story even at such a moment as this. "And I didn't understand about his cubic capacities and his percentages of oxygen and carbon dioxide, but I understood his answer all right—and he guaranteed it to be accurate. He said the air would last an adult for nineteen hours."

"And there are two of us here, so that means nine and a half hours each." Drury looked at his wrist watch. "It's ten past eleven now; say, eleven when the door shut. Half-past eight is our limit, then. Any chance of being let out before then?"

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

Mr. Harrison shook his head. "No. The caretaker doesn't come until nine. He's a very punctual man, too. Never before his time and never late."

"Hm, that means ten hours in here. Half an hour too long. It doesn't seem fair, does it? Well, we know the worst now. There's no uncertainty about it."

"It's a good job we have electric light," observed Mr. Harrison. "No need to turn that off, anyway. We'd better not smoke any more though. The atmosphere will get bad soon enough without that."

In spite of his first outburst of panic the manager was a brave man and accepted the inevitable calmly and stoically. He did the only thing possible under the circumstances. He began to write a long letter to his bride. He covered page after page of his pocket book with his small neat writing, lovingly and heroically bidding farewell to her. Drury followed his example and wrote three letters. The first, a very long one, was to his wife, the second to his children, and the third to his superiors at Scotland Yard in the form of a final official report.

"Awfully sorry I let you in for this," he said, when he had finished his letters and stowed them safely away in his pocket. Mr. Harrison smiled wryly.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"Not your fault. More mine than yours. But I can't understand why the door shut like that. The hinges are made so that it tends to swing open rather than shut when it's unlocked, in order to prevent accidents of this sort. So, naturally, I never thought of propping it open. We never have done before."

Conversation languished, and the two men sat in the cold, hard light of the unshaded lamp waiting for the death that was such a weary time coming to them. The air was very hot and oppressive, and they had long since shed their coats and waistcoats. Time hung on leaden feet and the minutes passed with unendurable slowness. Death in itself is not very terrifying because it is the one thing in which all men are equal; besides, it is mercifully ordained that man knows not when he shall die, so there remains unto the end the hope of life. But when this is altogether taken away and the end is fixed for a certain time, then death becomes a hard thing to face as the time grows nearer and ever nearer. And it is all the harder for a man happily married like Drury, or about to be married like Harrison.

* * * * *

By four o'clock the heat was stifling. A steamy mist had formed on the walls of the strong room, and little trickles of moisture ran

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

down the black japanned sides of the deed boxes in their green-painted racks. Both men had taken off their collars and undone their shirts at the neck. At Drury's suggestion they were lying down and resting in an attempt to slow down their breathing and restrict the consumption of air. They were intensely thirsty and there was nothing to drink. The silence inside the massive steel walls was weird and unearthly. Not a sound of any kind penetrated from the outside world, and the profound stillness of the grave seemed already to have encompassed the two prisoners.

Another intolerable three hours passed somehow, and Drury noticed that his breathing was beginning to get deeper and quicker as his starving lungs fought for the fast-vanishing oxygen in the vitiated air. Harrison complained of severe headache; presently Drury noticed it also. It began as a vague heaviness which rapidly increased until it became an actual pain. It grew more and more difficult to think clearly, and for the life of him Drury could not remember whether he had said all he wanted to say in his official report. Even though it was his last, written in the valley of the shadow of death, he was intensely anxious for it to be perfect of its kind, for his sense of duty was strong and his standard of competence a high one. He took out his pocket book and tried to focus the dancing print with

THE RAY OF DOOM

his aching eyes. When he wrote the report the air was comparatively pure and all the events of the day were fresh in his memory, so he had not referred to his diary, in which he was in the habit of making short notes of his daily work. Now he could no longer trust his memory and wanted to check it with the aid of the written word.

His head seemed to open and shut as he turned over the pages. April 17th, April 18th, what was to-day? Saturday the 19th. A gasping voice interrupted him:

"It looks as if that professor was about right. What time is it now? Half-past seven. Only an hour left. The sooner the better."

The half-focused print disappeared in a whirl of flashing lines and circles just as Drury had succeeded in spelling out the letters "Da . . ." after the date.

"Shut up!" he snapped, almost frantic with disappointment at his failure. Immediately, with the rapid emotional changes of intoxication, he was remorseful for his display of ill-temper. "Sorry, but I was trying to read something important and you put me off."

"Nothing's important now," replied Harrison with grim humour. But he kept silent after that, and Drury resumed his painful task. The light was growing dim, so he reached up and wiped the bulb with his handkerchief.

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

The diary was a little more distinct when the coating of moisture beads had been removed from the lamp. The words were coming clearer. "Day . . ." No, it had gone again.

Drury roused his bemused and failing brain to one last superhuman effort. He was sure it was something very important indeed, something vital, if only he could get at it through this grey, swirling mist which swam before his eyes. He shut them firmly for a couple of centuries—or so it seemed—to rest them, and tried again. This time he succeeded in reading three words. It was enough.

"Harrison!" he shouted. "Harrison! Listen!" He read out the words aloud. There was no reply. He jumped up and ran across to the prostrate figure at the other side of the room. Even this slight exertion made his oxygen-starved lungs heave and pant painfully for breath, and for a moment or two he could do nothing but stand and gasp. Had the ray of hope come too late to save Harrison? Was he dead, just when the sentence of death hanging over them was lifted and they were relieved? He put his hand to the manager's heart. Harrison's eyes opened and looked up at him with a new light in them. The stare of hopeless apathy was gone, to be replaced by a joyous gleam of happiness and exultation.

"I heard you," he said. "But—I don't often pray, and I didn't like to begin while

THE RAY OF DOOM

we were in a hole. It seemed sort of unsporting. But directly you spoke I don't mind admitting that I said thank you."

He sat up and shook Drury by the hand. The sudden transition from black despair to the hope of life had wrought a wonderful change in both men. They felt better and stronger than they had felt for a couple of hours or more. The laboured breathing and the headache were still present, of course; nothing but fresh air would cure those, but they seemed more bearable now. But it was only a temporary improvement, for the atmosphere was getting worse and worse, more and more heavily laden with poison.

"Are you sure the caretaker will be up to time?" said Drury.

"Absolutely to the minute. He always is. Never known him late. He's one of those people who are always checking their watches against time signals. And he'll know there's something wrong directly he comes down here and sees the key in the door."

There was silence in the strong room. A wave of dizziness swept over Drury and he lay down again. As he did so the prosaic deed boxes flickered and faded in the dancing flashes of light which filled his whole horizon. The damp walls beyond seemed to recede ever more and more swiftly with a roaring sound that echoed in his ears like the thunder of surf

THE ROOM OF DREADFUL NIGHT

upon the rocks. The bright glow of the electric light swelled and expanded in a whirl of luminous flame, dotted with patches of vacant, empty blackness. Streams of flashing fire shot from it like sunbeams of dazzling intensity, and yet the room was growing darker and darker. Overwhelming terror and despair took possession of Drury's soul in spite of the faint and fading memory of the reassuring words in the diary. There was surely no hope now, for the beginning of the end had come. He felt no pain, and even fear presently left him. If this was death, then death was not unpleasant. He tried to lift his arm to look at his watch, but the effort was too much and it fell limply by his side. That was his last act before he gave himself up wholly to silence, darkness and the blessed relief of unconsciousness.

The church clocks outside crept on to the fatal hour of half-past eight, which was the extreme limit of life for the prisoners of the strong room.

* * * * *

Sure enough, the caretaker arrived in Chancery Lane a few minutes before Big Ben began to strike nine. He was amazed to find the front gates open, and began his round of inspection even more promptly than usual. When he came to strong room number 2 he saw at once that the key was in the lock and the

THE RAY OF DOOM

bolts not properly secured. He seized the handle and slowly swung open the door in order to make sure of shutting it properly.

A wave of hot, foul air gushed out, and he stared into the depths of the strong room in thunderstricken amazement.

CHAPTER XIII

THE FINAL MESSAGE

THE Liberator's final message to the world was sent in the first place, like his previous ones, to the *Daily Wire*. This astute journal took full advantage of such a glorious scoop, and rushed out a special edition of twice the usual number of pages. The whole of the front sheet, except for the three-inch head-lines, was taken up by a photographic enlargement of the message itself, which was composed of printed words and letters cut from a newspaper and stuck on to a sheet of foolscap. Most of the other pages were occupied by a recapitulation of the whole case, together with such meagre facts as could be extracted from the Commissioner of Police, and an imposing array of special articles.

These were written by leaders of commerce and industry, by scientists and economists of repute, and by bankers and agricultural experts, and dealt with the probable effects of The Liberator's promised campaign. They had been commissioned and written in a hurry, in the middle of the night, and constituted a lasting

THE RAY OF DOOM

tribute to the enterprise of the *Daily Wire*. With characteristic modesty the leading article did not omit to say so, and indeed, from any standpoint, it was a remarkable feat of journalism. The Liberator's message did not arrive at United House, the head-quarters of the *Wire*, until eleven o'clock at night. Before half-past, the editor, with the full sanction and enthusiastic approval of Lord Burnhamside, the owner of the paper, was ringing up a dozen selected contributors, half of whom were in bed, and offering each of them a flat rate of a hundred guineas for a thousand words, provided that it was ready for collection by messenger in one hour's time. The roughest of rough copy would do; there was no time for polished phrases, and typewriting was not essential. All that mattered was speed and the eminence of the authors.

The articles were mainly an amplification of the opinions which were expressed at the historic Cabinet Meeting three weeks previously. The whole edition occupied fifty-six pages and sold in unprecedented numbers. Hour after hour the huge rotary presses thundered and roared, mile after mile of paper was flung into their whirling rollers and rushed off, still damp, in the waiting vans. The marvellous organisation of United Press, Ltd., was taxed to the utmost. Four days' supply of paper was used in one delirious night and orders for still more

THE FINAL MESSAGE

copies were pouring in. A special train from the paper mills had to be chartered to keep the ravenous presses going. A second shift of men was hastily collected for service at the printing works, for the roaring clatter of the machines continued for seven hours longer than usual. No less than five and a half million copies of that edition were sold.

The Liberator's message was in the following terms :

"My plans are now complete and the campaign has begun. My agents are already on their way to their appointed stations, bearing with them the necessary equipment. Zero hour is already fixed, and at that moment I and my agents will simultaneously turn our switches and the greatest feat in the history of science will be accomplished. Nothing can stop it now—the forces of conservatism, jealousy and hide-bound obscurantism are once and for all defeated."

The whole newspaper world was in an uproar. No such exclusive scoop had ever fallen to the lot of a single paper before. But the others did their best to make up for lost time. The news was copied with variations from paper to paper; it was flashed over the cables to every country and in every language. All over the world edition after edition was rushed out in

THE RAY OF DOOM

town and city. From the staidest of the big morning dailies to the most scurrilous of the Sunday papers, everyone was infected by the same virus. The Liberator's message was translated into scores of languages and dialects. It appeared in headachy black-letter German type, in flowing Arabic, in quaint, square-looking Chinese characters. Even the tiniest of local news-sheets, written and printed by sweating editor-compositor-proprietors, were full of it. Murder cases, society scandal, national politics and international squabbles, everything gave way to The Liberator. All else became unreal and unimportant and was ruthlessly swept out of the way to make room for the all-engrossing topic. Never was such universal interest taken in a single event.

And with good reason. For the first time in history here was news which concerned every living creature. The great mass of mankind, the peasants who get their living from the earth and who many times outnumber all the rest of its inhabitants, are unconcerned by wars, by revolutions, and the overthrow of dynasties; these are mere trivialities, which flow over their heads and leave them unmoved. Kings may strut and conquerors may posture, but it is the man with the spade and hoe who really matters. Seed time and harvest come round as they have always done, and by them and through them mankind lives, though men

THE FINAL MESSAGE

may die. But if the harvest fails—final, universal, irrevocable failure—the uncounted millions of Chinese coolies in their rice fields will die just as surely as the society ladies of London and Paris.

In order to find an incident of similar character it is necessary to go back more than nine centuries. In the year one thousand it was confidently believed that the end of the world was at hand, and civilisation was brought to a standstill. But even this only applied to Christendom. The Liberator's threat was far more comprehensive; nor were many suffered to remain in ignorance of it.

The first effect of the shock was a widespread religious revival. As yet the threat to world safety was too uncertain to interfere much with the ordinary routine of life. After all, experts and their forecasts are not infallible. But it was definite enough to make everyone think and to make many afraid. Everywhere the tolling of bells called the people to prayer, and the churches were open night and day. They were better attended than they had been for generations; thousands went who had never gone for years, for scruples like those of Mr. Harrison were rare.

Special services of intercession were held in mighty cathedrals of historic beauty and matchless majesty of architecture, in shoddy suburban churches built of brick and pitch pine (with

THE RAY OF DOOM

deal substituted where it wouldn't show), in bare, sturdy little country chapels of grey stone; and a great chorus of supplication arose that this fate might not come to pass. Jewish synagogues, Nonconformist chapels, Roman Catholic churches and Mormon temples: for once all were united in their prayers. The flamboyant but wholly sincere and heroic Salvation Army was extremely active. Their large open-air services attracted enormous congregations, so large that the police had frequently to interfere on account of obstruction to traffic. In every town of any size the thumping of the drum and the shouting of the preachers called sinners to repentance and found them in abundance.

All over Africa and India the rumour spread—and lost nothing in the spreading. Temples were besieged with pagan worshippers and idols were dragged in procession through the streets. The smoke of sacrifices vied with the flame of candles and the perfume of joss sticks in its unceasing ascent.

Only the Mohammedan mosques were silent—a silence not without dignity. For what is written is written, and it is the will of Allah. The muezzin's call to prayer remained unaltered, and the faithful of Islam prayed as they had always done—no more, no less.

The orators in Hyde Park did not neglect such a magnificent theme. One and all they

THE FINAL MESSAGE

dragged it into their discourses, and under the tolerant eyes of the watching policemen The Liberator was used as an argument for and against a hundred fads and fancy religions. In other ways life went on much as usual for a time. Factory buzzers called the workers to their places at the accustomed hour, shops still kept open, and cinemas still offered sixpenny-worths of meretricious romance and impossible adventure to those whose lives were destitute of both. One enterprising firm even brought out a Liberator biscuit, which had an enormous sale. Day and night trains kept to their timetables carrying mails and goods and passengers; day and night fleets of long-distance buses roared up and down the Great North Road at grossly illegal speeds. There was baptism and marriage and births and deaths and sickness. Lovers still walked in country lanes and planned their future life in the certainty that there was a future. Men still insured themselves and the companies still accepted the premiums.

The first hint of trouble came from India, that incompatible mixture of races and religions and castes which are only at peace when restrained by the iron hand of a strong and fearless government—and not always then. The Mohammedans began it. Secure in the stronghold of their own fatalistic doctrine, they openly jeered at the intercession ceremonies and processions of the Hindus. The latter,

THE RAY OF DOOM

being in their own way just as deeply religious as their rivals, resented the taunts and signified their disapproval in the usual manner, and with the acrimonious bitterness which has always been peculiar to religious disputes. Widespread riots broke out, in which many adherents of both creeds were killed, in addition to a few inoffensive and peaceable citizens of various colours and race who were unfortunate enough to be near the centres of disturbance. The police had to call in the aid of the army to restore order, which was eventually done at a cost of over a hundred soldiers killed and wounded. This loss might have been less, but commanding officers remembered Amritsar and the censure of the man who dared to quell a riot at its beginning.

Hardly had the bazaars of India simmered down into an uneasy peace when news came over the cables of a great revolt in South Africa. Thousands of Kaffirs began to assert their rights by deed as well as word, and the colour question, always acute, flamed out into open warfare. Much more vigorous measures were used than in India, especially in districts where the Dutch element predominated. The back veld Boer, with generations of hardship and warfare behind him, is not hampered by the humanitarian scruples which arise from higher education and city-bred security of life. To him the problem was simple, if urgent,

THE FINAL MESSAGE

and he solved it in his own way. To men whose fathers had faced the rush of Zulu impis and who had been trained from boyhood to live on horseback and to shoot superlatively well the revolt presented few difficulties. Mounted commandos of burghers rounded up the blacks like sheep and shot down those who attempted to resist or escape. Scores of thousands were herded into stockades and kept there under military law until the whole country was pacified. They were then released gradually and kept under strict supervision in their own districts. For months no coloured man was allowed out after dark even in his own town or village, and he was not allowed to leave it on any pretence whatever. About fifty of the ringleaders, who had been caught redhanded in the riot, were shot and another fifty sentenced to long terms of imprisonment.

New York also had trouble about this time. Police foot patrols had to be withdrawn from the negro quarter and replaced by armoured cars. A wave of insurrection spread over South America ; presidents and administrations, at the best of times transitory and insecure, fell like ninepins, to be replaced by others which collapsed just as quickly.

The next problem which the governments of the world had to face, and it was practically universal, was that of food hoarding. There was a tremendous rush on the retail shops ;

THE RAY OF DOOM

queues waited and crowds struggled outside them for hours on end, and would only disperse when the entire stock had been cleared. In every street parcels were carried home or delivered in far greater numbers than usual. Cars loaded with packets, tins and bottles slid into private garages to unload their booty under cover of darkness. School children took home tins of meat in their satchels, office workers in their attaché cases. Everybody was carrying something. As yet no proclamations forbidding hoardings had been issued; these came two or three days later when wholesalers' stocks were practically exhausted. But there was an ugly tension in the air, and prejudice ran high. Many cars were stopped and their contents stolen by gangs of roughs who professed to be indignant at other people's selfishness. Some of them were even overturned and set on fire. This amusement grew very popular in the East End of London, and so many gangs were at work that for a few days the police were unable to guarantee protection. Utterly illegal but very valuable help came from an unexpected source. University students took the matter up and ranged themselves on the side of law and order with whole-hearted enthusiasm. Fifty private cars and commercial vans, borrowed or hired for the occasion, were decked out with empty provision cases strategically arranged and sent off into the

THE FINAL MESSAGE

East End on their crusade. When they arrived at the scene of operations, indicated by battered and derelict cars standing by the pavement, and a great litter of broken packing cases and gutted crates in the road, they were almost at once surrounded by a shouting crowd of men who compelled them to stop by means of a living barrier across the street. The roughs sprang forward with joyous whoops, anticipating a rich haul from the convoy. Their shouts soon changed to howls of dismay and pain, for from every car and van came blinding streams of liquid ammonia, carefully diluted below the danger point but none the less agonisingly incapacitating. The contents of the convoy, camouflaged by the empty packing cases, consisted entirely of students, garden squirts and barrels of ammonia. Loopholes were cunningly arranged between the cases and in the canvas covers of the vans, and from every loophole came a blinding, pungent jet which stung and smarted like liquid fire. More than this, it marked those whom it touched for many a day, for it was deeply stained with some aniline dye, suggested by an embryo chemist. This dye played no small part in the subsequent pacification of the East End—or rather, of its disorderly elements—because many of the hooligans dare not show themselves in the streets until its incriminating stains wore off, being under the impression

THE RAY OF DOOM

that it was some sort of trap arranged by the police. With yells of rage the gangs charged forward again and again, but human eyes and noses could not face that deadly barrage, and so the students won the salutary and entirely bloodless battle of Commercial Road.

Heavy reinforcements of police and a few exemplary sentences passed by the Stepney magistrate soon restored order, and the air was finally cleared by proclamations forbidding the hoarding of food or its purchase in excess of normal requirements for immediate consumption.

Many of the smaller shops closed altogether, either from the fear of looting or because their proprietors were devoting their whole time to Salvation Army work or church services. Their customers were promptly absorbed by the large multiple shop firms, which had no emotions beyond the earning of dividends.

So many people gave up all worldly occupations that the business of the Law Courts was seriously impeded. Jurymen and witnesses were frequently missing in spite of subpoenas and recognisances. Many were fined for contempt of court, but without effect. Money meant nothing to those who expected the world to end shortly. There was a boom in agriculture. For the first time for many years the acreage of land under the plough in industrial countries began to increase. Farmers were evidently

THE FINAL MESSAGE

attempting to raise the largest possible amount of crops while there was yet time. On the other hand, it was reported that enormous areas were going out of cultivation altogether in China and India. The flexible Hindu and the phlegmatic Mongol both apparently agreed that nothing was worth while in the face of impending doom.

The revolutionary government of Chile laid an embargo on the export of nitrates, which was strictly enforced. Not a single ship load could be procured at any price. The London Stock Exchange, after two days of utter confusion, closed until further notice, and the Bank rate was put up three times in a week by steps of two per cent. In south-eastern Europe and the Balkan States, always a storm centre, food rioting was far more serious and the situation got completely out of control. Wholesale robbery and looting took place, despite the threat of machine guns and martial law, and it was not until the ancient and barbaric custom of public execution was revived and put into practice in all its revolting detail that order was restored. British, French and American cruisers had a busy time embarking Europeans from various far eastern ports and conveying them to safety.

A great fire broke out in Constantinople and a large part of the city was destroyed. It began with the capture of a government motor

THE RAY OF DOOM

lorry. The thieves shot the driver and his guard and were busily engaged in looting the contents ; a carelessly flung match ignited petrol which was leaking from the tank, and the street was very narrow. It was the worst fire since that which followed the San Francisco earthquake. Seventy million pounds worth of damage was done, not counting the destruction of things which could never be replaced. The flames swept along the historic Golden Horn and then across the peninsula. The mosque of Sultan Mohammed and that of Sultan Bayezid were completely gutted and St. Sophia itself, that sixteen hundred year old gem of eastern architecture, was damaged almost beyond repair.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CODE MESSAGE

"WHAT the devil's happened to Drury?" grumbled the indefatigable McCarthy when he got back to the Yard on Sunday morning, somewhat irritable and dishevelled after a hard night's work. "Briggs rang up the safe deposit at half-past eleven last night and there was no reply; I didn't really expect one, because I thought he'd have finished there by that time. But he might at least have rung up here and let us know what he'd found. There's a spot of trouble coming to you, my lad, when you do come back."

The door opened and Drury walked in.

"Good Lord, man, whatever's been happening?" exclaimed McCarthy. "Here, sit down." He pulled forward a chair. He might well be astonished. All the inspector's usual spruce neatness was gone. His clothes were creased and dusty and his collar was draggled and limp. Even his handkerchief was filthy and looked like a piece of dirty rag. He staggered rather than walked with the reeling sway of complete exhaustion. His face was drawn and haggard

THE RAY OF DOOM

and its lines accentuated by dust and sweat. His eyes were heavy with weariness and his hair seemed to be a shade greyer than usual.

Drury sank gratefully into the arm-chair pulled forward by the kindly Chief Constable.

"Mind if I smoke, sir?"

"Do, by all means. Take your time and then tell us all about it." McCarthy saw that something very much out of the ordinary had happened, but wisely restrained his intense curiosity. He knew the value of patience in dealing with a man who had reached the end of his endurance.

Drury lit a cigarette and closed his eyes for a few seconds to savour to the full the pure joy of clean fresh air after the poisonous hours in the strong room. He had never fully realised before the wonderful fragrance of a smoke after a night of enforced abstinence, and above all and beyond all was the delicious glow of life after the threat and nearness of death.

He explained exactly what had happened, dwelling at some length on the professor's calculation. Many people have been suffocated and many have just escaped this fate, but to few has it been given to know with such exactness how long they had to live.

"He must have been wrong in his arithmetic somewhere," commented McCarthy. "Good job, too."

"No, sir, I don't think so. Judging by the

THE CODE MESSAGE

feel of it I should imagine he was pretty nearly right. I couldn't have lasted much longer in the place, anyhow. We were both about all in when the caretaker found us."

"But he must have been wrong," persisted McCarthy. "Otherwise you'd not be here."

"No, it was something else which saved us. Guess what it was."

"Air leak round the door?"

"No. It fitted down on to rubber pads all round."

"You took it in turns to breathe through the keyhole?"

"There wasn't one. The door was a foot thick."

"Well, unless somebody had stored oxygen cylinders in the strong room, which seems unlikely, I don't know how you managed it. Oh, yes, I do," and McCarthy's eyes twinkled with merriment. "There's only one possible explanation, so it must be the true one. You murdered the other chap and had a double quantity of air to live on."

"Very sound, sir, but Harrison happens to be at home now. I can give you his address if you like."

"Well, I give it up."

"Look at your watch, sir."

"Dash it all, I am looking at it, and that's what makes it so difficult. You had air for only nine and a half hours, and you want me to

THE RAY OF DOOM

believe you lived on it from eleven o'clock at night until nine in the morning——"

"Yes, that's right."

"Which is ten hours."

"Nine."

McCarthy stared at him with some concern. The inspector must be even worse than he looked, which was saying a good deal, if he was unable to do a simple subtraction sum. McCarthy devoutly hoped that the poisonous effects of semi-suffocation were only temporary, for Drury was one of his best men, and it was important that Scotland Yard should be working at its most efficient pitch during the present crisis. He pressed a button on his desk.

"Have another look at your watch, sir," suggested the inspector, and there was a glimmer of a smile in his tired eyes.

"Get a taxi, will you?" said McCarthy to the officer who answered his bell. The sooner Drury got back home to bed the better. "What did you say?" The Chief Constable's ruddy face almost blushed as Drury's meaning dawned upon him. He bent over and unstrapped the watch from his large and hairy wrist.

"Yes, I've arrived," he said, and turned the hands forward one hour. "I'd forgotten all about daylight saving," he confessed. "I've been messing about in Laburnum Terrace all night and it never entered my head to put my

THE CODE MESSAGE

watch on. Seems to me it saved something more than daylight last night."

"It certainly did, sir," replied Drury with feeling. "Was there anything interesting in the house, by the way?"

"Yes. I found a sheet of figures in the desk. Typewritten, carbon copy. Looked like a cipher of some sort. I've sent it along to be photographed, so there'll be something for you to exercise your brains on when you've had a rest. There were some rather interesting entries in his pass-book, too."

"That fifteen hundred? I saw that. And the ninety pounds he paid to Bill Hirst."

"Yes, and some others as well. Since the fifteen hundred was paid in he's drawn three big cheques in favour of three different steamship lines. That'll have to be followed up. I'll put a man on to it. Also he has a big globe."

"What sort of a globe, sir?" Drury could only think of electric light globes and the one which had stared down upon him during the interminable hours in the strong room. From that his mind made a grotesque jump to the globes in which goldfish are kept. Neither of these seemed to be relevant.

"A geographical globe. For planning out his conquest of the world, I suppose."

"Oh, yes." Drury remembered the map which he had found in the deed box and took

THE RAY OF DOOM

it out of his pocket. Wrapped up in it were the farewell letters which he had written during the night. Should he keep them as mementoes of the narrowest escape he had ever had? No, their contents were too intimate, too sacred to be used for such a purpose. With a little sigh of thanksgiving he tore them up and watched the fragments flutter into the wastepaper basket by his chair. He unfolded the map and handed it to the Chief Constable. McCarthy examined it with interest.

"What are these circles for?" he asked.

"Don't know, sir. I know no more about it than you do."

"This looks very much the same as the cipher I found at the house." McCarthy had turned the map over and was looking at the columns of figures written on the back of it. "We can soon find out if they are the same." He went to the door. "Wilson," he called, "go to the dark room and ask them to let me have that cipher back if they've finished with it."

Two minutes later the paper arrived, and McCarthy compared it with the map.

"Yes, it is the same. I thought it was. I suppose he worked out his cipher on the map and then made fair copies on the typewriter."

THE CODE MESSAGE

The Cipher Message

109513	074919	120922	004820	110336	041601	055504
036801	028301	104619	119108	120922	005205	005930
120925	104001	120922	004820	110336	073722	093222
119916	033901	063507	104619	000101	117515	074113
113510	053506	058901	071817	104619	017527	109513
014110	109202	073310	074429	109202	012610	008301
074113	109202	061604	013511	104619	109225	022014
115301	109202	004302	055504	000802	119916	109202
028701	055504	109202	063409	074113	109202	012320
104619	005930	109202	110034	103917	055504	109202
014219	119120	119602	008718	097911	062016	113202
106820	000101	110336	109202	092525	003310	046020
003111	037413	074113	113510	053118	104619	118216
109202	047915	056212	061604	109202	119417	110034
104619	954605	059015	046622	075514	040312	109202
102332	077522	055504	113202	115201	059015	063507
001821	003310	046019	037611	110034	110336	109202
037413	110336	021202	041705	109202	110034	102619
032903	109202	090829	104619	109202	070301	063702
016430	074113	038013	058901	000101	027113	055504
109202	043727	119811	066732	006922	055504	102332
077522	012320	104619	090616	109124	120922	050231
074509	087227	074113	109202	033203	106325	110336
026601	119916	000101	090127	113409	109607	068524
119510	003310	100312	109607	068524	043201	082104
110336	035819	110016	003111	004821	074113	071808
039610	068614	103422	068524	104619	071216	104001
058901	005930	071405	073418	071405	107317	194203
000101	087812	000101	049020	094203		

THE RAY OF DOOM

After a day and a night in bed Drury felt very much better, so much so that he reported for duty again on the Monday morning. He learnt from McCarthy that Superintendent Ellison had been away for the day on Sunday, and so The Liberator's cipher message was still unsolved. Ellison had been a captain in the Military Intelligence Branch during the War, and had acquired a considerable reputation as a cryptographer. He had received the D.S.O. for this work, and his Army Commander had put it on record that his speed and accuracy in deciphering German signals and wireless messages were equivalent to the saving of half a battalion a week during the Somme offensive.

McCarthy and various others, including the Commissioner and his deputies, had racked their brains over the mysterious message for many hours, but in vain, and they had at last decided to wait for Ellison's return rather than seek outside help. Twelve hours' delay was thought to be less harmful than the risk of publicity at this stage of the case. Drury at once went to Ellison's room and found that the superintendent had just arrived. Photographic copies of The Liberator's manuscript were waiting for him, together with a frequency table compiled by the amateurs who had previously attempted its solution. Their knowledge of cryptography had carried them thus far and no farther. They had found that the figure group 109202 occurred

THE CODE MESSAGE

nineteen times, 104619 ten times, and three others (074113, 110336, 055504) seven times each. They had assumed 109202 to be *e*, the most commonly used letter of the alphabet, but were unable to get beyond this point.

"Do you think you can solve it?" asked Drury anxiously.

"I think so," replied Ellison, carefully scanning the columns of figures. "Of course, it doesn't do to be too cocksure, but it looks pretty easy. Are you going to give me a hand with it?"

"I don't think I can help much. I don't know anything about this job."

"It doesn't matter. If you'll do a bit of unskilled labour it'll save a lot of time and trouble. You want it as soon as possible, I suppose?"

"Yes. Everybody's waiting for it with their tongues hanging out."

"Well, then, you rewrite all the groups in numerical order, starting with the smallest. We shall almost certainly want them tabulating like that. You might count them as well and find out how many groups there are altogether, while I'm having a good look at it."

There was silence for half an hour, except for the sound of Drury's pencil as he busily copied out the two hundred odd groups in long columns, starting with 000101 and ending with 120925. He finished the last one with some relief, for

THE RAY OF DOOM

it was dull work and he was anxious to see the unravelling process begin.

"I believe I'm getting on the track of it," said Ellison. "There's just one more job you can do, and it'll give me another ten minutes. How many groups are there in the message?"

"Two hundred and one."

"Get a newspaper and mark off two hundred words out of one of the leading articles. Then make a frequency count of the common words like *and, the, of* and *for*. Then do it again for another two hundred words, so that we can strike an average."

At last Ellison was ready to start.

"The first thing we've got to do is to decide whether it is a code or a cipher," he began, arranging his little pile of frequency tables on the blotting pad.

"What's the difference?"

"A code consists of symbols—they may be letters, words or figures—which represent words or phrases according to a prearranged list, and this list or code book is used to interpret them both by the sender of the message and the receiver. A cipher consists of symbols which represent letters of the alphabet according to a prearranged formula and so no code book is needed. The formula will encipher a message or solve it."

"I see."

"This doesn't look like a code to me. All

THE CODE MESSAGE

the groups are six figured, which means that it has a range up to a million. Well, nobody needs a million words. I doubt if any language has a million words."

"They say Shakespeare only used sixteen thousand."

"Quite so. The ordinary code contains common words and phrases only, and any that aren't in it can be spelt out. Five figures will allow you a hundred thousand words, which is enough for anybody, and much less trouble to write. So it can't very well be a code in the ordinary sense of the word. Anyway if it is it's a home-made one, because it has so many repetitions."

"Surely there are bound to be repetitions in any code?"

"Not necessarily, and certainly not to this extent if it's a good one. Common words that occur over and over again ought to have variants."

"What do you mean?"

"Half a dozen or a dozen different code words meaning the same thing, so that you can use them indiscriminately and make it more difficult to break the code."

"I don't see how you can solve it at all if they do that."

"Oh, it's possible. They do even worse things sometimes. All good codes have nulls as well as variants—meaningless code groups

THE RAY OF DOOM

scattered about in the message. The receiver looks them up and finds out at once that he has to ignore them, but they are the very devil when you haven't got the key."

"I should think they are." Drury's conception of the difficulties of cryptography was getting clearer, and he looked with a new respect upon the man who had broken the most scientifically constructed German codes even under the rush and stress of active service conditions.

"Now let's see if it's a cipher. Do you know anything about the frequencies of letters?"

"Not much."

"Well, in English *e* is by far the most commonly used letter—about twelve per cent.—with *t*, *a*, *o*, *i*, *n* and *r* nearly equal as a very poor second with about six to eight per cent. each. In German *e* is still more common and *n* comes next, far above all the others. The two together make up nearly a third of any message of reasonable length. In French the proportion of *e*'s is enormous, nearly twenty per cent., and the other letters are used in nearly the same proportions as in English, except that they have more *u*'s and less *h*'s. Italian is noted for its *a*'s and *i*'s, which are very nearly as common as *e*. Portuguese has *a* and *e* bracketed equal with *o* running them very close. Spanish is the only language where the

THE CODE MESSAGE

a's get just ahead of the *e*'s. You've no idea what language this is, I suppose?"

"None at all. The only thing we know is that The Liberator is almost certainly English."

"We'll try English first then. We'll assume 109202 to be *e*, as it occurs nineteen times in two hundred letters—if they are letters. Go through the original message again and read out every 109202 and the two groups preceding it in each case. I'll write them down."

A whole sheet was covered with the fifty-seven groups:

109513	014110	109202	000101	110336	109202
073310	074429	109202	104619	118216	109202
008301	074113	109202	056212	061604	109202
022014	115301	109202	075514	040312	109202
000802	119916	109202	110034	110336	109202
028701	055504	109202	021202	041705	109202
063409	074113	109202	102619	032903	109202
104619	005930	109202	090829	104619	109202
103917	055504	109202	027113	055504	109202
			087227	074113	109202

"Now if this last column of 109202's are really *e*'s there will certainly be repetitions in the other columns, because *th* is so common before *e*—*the*, *then*, *them*, *there* and so on. It obviously isn't so, so we'll wash out ciphers for the moment and go back to code."

Ellison shoved back his chair and threw his

THE RAY OF DOOM

cigarette into the fire-place. This was work after his own heart, and he felt the glow of satisfaction which comes from willing and eager labour.

"The man who designed it is evidently a novice, to judge by all his repetitions, so he must be using something pretty elementary. It looks to me as if he'd used a book and indicated words in it by his figures. 109202 might be the two hundred and second word on page one hundred and nine or the second word on page one thousand and ninety-two. The point is, which? Will you go through that table you made and find out the lowest and the highest first three figures and the lowest and the highest last three figures?"

In a few minutes the following table was compiled and added to the available data:

			First three figures.	Last three figures.
Lowest	-	-	000	001
Highest	-	-	120	930

"That doesn't seem right," said Ellison. Drury held his peace. The argument was difficult to follow. "You can't very well have page 000 and you don't want word number 930—it would take far too much counting. Let's try again in groups of first four and last two this time." Like many other things it was easy enough when explained.

THE CODE MESSAGE

The next table worked out thus:

			First four figures.	Last two figures.
Lowest	-	-	0001	01
Highest	-	-	1209	36

"That looks much more promising," remarked the superintendent. "It would suit a book of about twelve hundred pages and it would be very convenient not to have to count up to more than thirty-six. Of course, for all we know it may be the other way round—the first figures may be the word and the last ones the page—but we'll try this out first. The easiest book to use would be a dictionary because you can find any word you want at once, which you can't always do in other books. Hand me that Chambers's Twentieth Century dictionary, will you? The red book on the second shelf. Thanks. Yes, it's got about twelve hundred pages, so it will do very well to test our guesswork. What's the biggest number of the lot?"

"120925," replied Drury, consulting his table of numerical order.

"We'll call that page 1209. That's somewhere near the end, so we can assume that it stands for a word beginning with x, y or z. How often does 1209 occur?"

"Four times." Drury now saw the value of his laboriously compiled table.

THE RAY OF DOOM

"Then we can wash out *x* and *z*. They're not going to come in four times in two hundred words. Look up the *y*'s in Chambers's."

He passed the volume over to Drury, who opened it and turned to the last pages.

"There are eight columns of them. Good Lord, what words! *Yataghan*, *Yggdrasil*, *Yiddish* and *Ytterbium*!"

"I don't think *The Liberator* will be writing about any of those. Look through all the *y*'s and see what group of common words you can find. Common words, mind you, likely to be used four times in two hundred."

"*You* seems to be the most important. *You*, *your*, *yours*, *yourself*. *You* would be—let me see—114421 in this dictionary. Yes, that's right. Page 1144 and the twenty-first word on the page."

"Yes, but don't bother about that now. We'll assume 120922 to be *you*. That occurs three times in the message. What's the other 1209 word?" Ellison consulted the list again. "120925—that's three words farther on. What is the third word after *you*?"

"*Your*." Drury was excitedly clutching the dictionary with both hands. He found this game enthrallingly interesting.

"That sounds reasonable enough. It's a word likely to be used. Let's have another try, at the other end of the alphabet this time. What's our lowest number?"

THE CODE MESSAGE

"000101."

"That's easy. First word on page one. That'll be *a* in all dictionaries. Let's think out a list of common words—common ones only—which come soon after *a*."

"*And*," suggested Drury.

"Yes. And what about *an*?"

A few minutes' thought produced seven words, *a*, *an*, *and*, *any*, *are*, *as* and *at*.

"Now put these into code from Chambers's dictionary. Page only. Don't bother about the number of the word. We're only doing things approximately." Drury did as requested.

"Now put down in a parallel column the lowest groups in the table you made out from the message itself."

The result looked like this:

				Chambers's Dictionary.	From Message.
<i>a</i>	-	-	-	0001	0001
<i>an</i>	-	-	-	0029	0031
<i>and</i>	-	-	-	0032	0033
<i>any</i>	-	-	-	0040	—
<i>are</i>	-	-	-	0048	0048
<i>as</i>	-	-	-	0053	0053
<i>at</i>	-	-	-	0058	0059

"Those seem to fit very well. Pure guess-work, of course, and it may be hopelessly wrong. We'll try another comparison and if that fits

THE RAY OF DOOM

in as well we shall be pretty safe in saying that some dictionary was used."

"Do you think it might have been this one?"

"I don't know yet. Try it and see, if you like, while I get my pipe filled."

Drury turned to the beginning of The Liberator's message and began to flutter the pages of his book.

"The first word is *vernal*."

Ellison made non-committal noises.

"The second is *putative*."

"Doesn't sound too good."

"The next one—O Lord, this is in the supplement of War-time words—*action radius*."

Ellison chuckled softly at Drury's look of disappointment.

"Go on. Try another word or two. It doesn't seem to make sense, but you never know. Telegram language is often a bit obscure."

"*Arear*," read out Drury. A few seconds later he shut the dictionary with a bang and threw it on the desk. "We've come to a dead end. The next word is number thirty-six on page 1103 and there are only thirty-one words on that page."

"That settles it. You can't expect to hit it off straight away, anyhow. You're trying to go too quickly. After all, we only suspect a dictionary so far. We don't know for certain. And even if we're right, there are scores of

THE CODE MESSAGE

them. We want a bit more proof before we try hunting through every one in the British Museum Library. There must be hundreds of them. Even if it's an English message it could be coded from the English portion of any foreign language dictionary. Let's have a look at those frequency tables from the newspaper articles and compare them with the frequencies in the message."

Words.	First 200 word article.	Second 200 word article.	Code groups.	201 word code message.
<i>the</i>	- 25	12	109202	19
<i>of</i>	- 10	5	104619	10
<i>to</i>	- 4	5	074113	7
<i>in</i>	- 6	3	110336	7
<i>and</i>	- 5	4	055504	7

"109202 is obviously *the*," went on Ellison. "Couldn't be anything else. What's the next number after it?"

"109225."

"Right. That's twenty-three words farther on. Look up *the* in Chambers's and take the twenty-third word after it."

Drury ran his finger down the page, counting as he went.

"Then," he announced.

"Sounds all right. More likely than *Theobroma*, *Thermidor* and *Theriaca*." Ellison

THE RAY OF DOOM

was leaning over Drury's shoulder and quoting from the open pages. "We may be on the right track still. Make a note of our first word identified."

"Right. 109202 equals *the*."

"Can we get another word from it? We ought to be able to. According to the comparison with the newspaper articles 104619 ought to be *of*. 1046 from 1092 is 46, so it occurs 46 pages in front of *the*. Look up *the* in Chambers's and turn back 46 pages." Drury did so.

"No luck. All the words begin with *st*-, and I can't see any very common ones. The *o*'s are about four hundred pages farther back."

"Oh, of course. What a fool I was. A common code word beginning with *st*-. It doesn't come into the newspaper frequency at all. It's *stop*, of course—the only punctuation mark ever used in these sort of messages."

Again Drury began his search.

"Fifty-one pages between *the* and *stop*," he announced.

"Um, well. That corresponds fairly well. You won't get it to a page or two every time. We'll have another shot at identifying *of*, taking the second word in each frequency table, with *stop* excluded. Get on with the subtraction. I'm giving you all the office boy's work!"

"*Of* is 51 pages in front of *the* in Chambers's," said Drury, after some research, "and 074113

THE CODE MESSAGE

is 51 pages in front of *the*—or what we think is *the*—in the code."

"That pretty well settles it," said Ellison. "He certainly used a dictionary, twelve hundred page size, and he certainly used it in this way. It fits too closely to be mere coincidence. All we have to do is to go to the British Museum and try it until we find the right one."

* * * * *

Superintendent Ellison, Chief Constable McCarthy and Drury spent four hours in the reading-room that afternoon, and by half past three the right dictionary was found.* The decoded message ran as follows:

This order you are to follow in exact detail—stop—When you arrive at your station you are to obtain room with electric light—stop—A volt-(age) of two hundred is necessary—stop—Check this by the number on the brass base of the lamp bulb—stop—Then connect up the apparatus in accordance with the diagram in the lid of the box—stop—At the time stated in the cable which will be sent later turn switch A to the right and give an exposure of two hours—stop—Watch the green indicator lamp the whole time—stop—If it goes out fit the spare parts in turn until it lights again

* Cassell's New English Dictionary. 3rd Edition. 1,300 pages.

THE RAY OF DOOM

and give extra time to the exposure to compensate for the time spent during the repair—stop—The most likely cause of failure is a defect in the fuse wire marked B in spare part box—stop—Remember that you have one quarter of the earth(s) surface to deal with a region twelve thousand miles wide and six thousand miles from pole to equator with an area of nearly fifty million square miles—stop—My station is at nontsarahs.

"And that's that," said Ellison, as the last letter was decoded. "All fits in beautifully and makes perfect sense except the last word. I don't know what the devil that means."

"Nor do I," said McCarthy ruefully. "We haven't got it wrong, I suppose?"

"No, I'm perfectly certain we haven't. All three of us have checked it and got the same results. It must be something darned unusual, because he spelled it out letter by letter and there aren't many words you can't find in a dictionary of this size."

"I know where it is," put in Drury eagerly. "Nont Sarah's is a pub. It's about the loneliest and most desolate place in England."

CHAPTER XV

THE SÉANCE

MR. ANDREWS deposited his visitor in a comfortable arm-chair and produced siphon and bottles from the sideboard.

"Scotch or Irish?" he asked.

Mr. Unwin looked rapidly round the room before replying, but his hesitation was only momentary.

"Scotch, please." From past experience he was cautious about drinks, which had more than once proved his undoing. His host poured out a stiff whisky and passed it over.

"Well, cheer oh." Mr. Unwin raised the glass to his lips, but drank very little. Mr. Andrews next brought out a box of cigars. His guest accepted one of these without hesitation. There was no danger of indiscreet loosening of the tongue here, and there was no risk of the tobacco being doctored—not yet, at any rate. The goose is never killed before the golden eggs are laid. Mr. Unwin's life had been such that he thought of these things as a matter of course.

Andrews took a cigar himself and poured out his drink—with a very generous allowance of

THE RAY OF DOOM

soda. He also wanted a clear head for forthcoming negotiations. He bent forward to light his cigar with a paper spill and then leaned back with an air of complete content, as though ready to spend unlimited time in the company of his guest. He had black, well oiled hair which swept carefully carelessly over one eye in the manner affected by barbers and music-hall artists. His shoulders were broad and he carried them thrown back with the air of one who is well pleased with himself. He sat in one of those wooden framed easy chairs with a hole cut in the arm for the convenient reception of a tumbler. Being a man who liked to do everything differently from the usual method he did not use the hole provided, except to drop ash through it at intervals, but balanced his glass insecurely on the arm of the chair. The aspect of his room was decidedly Oriental, but this may not have been any indication of Mr. Andrews's own tastes; possibly it was merely done for effect. In view of the fraudulent character of his present occupation—for it may as well be admitted that all of Mr. Andrews's spiritualistic phenomena were deliberately faked—the latter explanation is the most probable. The carpet was British made Persian, the mantelpiece ornaments Chinese, of doubtful authenticity. The weapons hung on the wall were Indian—these were probably genuine, because Mr. Andrews had bought them from a

THE SÉANCE

retired Indian policeman. But round them all, sham or genuine, his glib tongue could weave the most wonderful tales. If all he said was true, and it passed for true among his followers, he was a great traveller. He had spent many years in the East studying oriental philosophy and mysticism. He had penetrated even the forbidden land of Tibet, and listened to the esoteric wisdom which fell from the lips of the Dalai Lama himself. During this perilous journey, he was wont to explain, he received the scar which still showed faintly upon his right temple. This was inflicted upon him by the public executioner of Lhasa, who had orders to do his work slowly and without undue hurry. From this lingering fate he had been rescued—here the account grew somewhat difficult to understand, for Mr. Andrews was not at liberty to divulge the Rosicrucian signs and symbols which had saved him and elevated him to high and honoured rank among the lamas. (As a matter of cold, hard fact the scar had been caused by a collision with a cold, hard wash-stand, on the night when its inebriated owner finally severed his connection with the stage.)

Mr. Andrews could also describe his journeys through India in native dress, when he learnt all that Brahminism had to teach, as well as the mystic secrets by which the fakirs attain mastery over bodily claims and desires. He could quote long passages from the Rig-Veda

THE RAY OF DOOM

and the Upanishads in the original Sanskrit. (It may or may not have been a coincidence, but on one occasion, when a lady of Hindu ancestry joined his coterie of disciples for a few months, Mr. Andrews ceased to refer to the Upanishads and began a course of lectures on Zarathustra and the Zend Avesta.) At the present moment the cigar and the whisky tended to dissipate the atmosphere of asceticism with which he usually liked to surround himself.

Mr. Unwin began his recital of the facts about The Liberator—as far as he knew them. They were quite unexpectedly accurate, for it was less trouble to tell the truth than to invent a new story. It is not everyone who is gifted with the imagination and loquacity of the O.G.P.U. agent. The only real variation from the truth was the pearl episode, which was outlined very sketchily and wholly incorrectly.

"So that's all you know?" queried Andrews, when he had finished.

"Yes, everything."

"Well, it's not much, but it's a good deal more than I knew," acknowledged Andrews. "It looks as if we shall have to follow Scotland Yard a bit longer. They'll not have lost anything——" and the speaker jerked his head in the direction of the house next door, where Mrs. Drury was waiting in vain for her husband. "They'll know all he knows and simply put another man on the job. It's a pity, when I'd

THE SÉANCE

taken all the trouble to get this house, so's to be nice and near to him, but it can't be helped. We just couldn't go and open that door when you'd shut it. Have another drink?"

"Thanks," said Mr. Unwin, pouring out a stiff double this time, secure in the knowledge that most of the first one was well soaked into the earth of a neighbouring flower pot. "Good whisky, this. I'm not sorry I came over here, after all."

"That's the right spirit. You'll find me a good partner to work with."

Mr. Andrews was outwardly friendly and benign, but, now that he had got all the information he wanted, he had not the slightest intention of continuing the partnership. He liked to work alone, or if this was not possible he preferred at least to choose his own confederate and not to accept one thrust upon him by chance.

On fuller consideration of the strong room incident—there had been time for this during the frequent gaps in the conversation—he had come to the conclusion that his first impressions had been mistaken. An assistant bound to him with the ties of blackmail would not, after all, be really useful. For if the assistant was still loyal to his former employers—and who could say whether he was or not?—he would be far more trouble, and danger, than he was worth. To all appearances Mr. Unwin was submissive

THE RAY OF DOOM

enough, but Andrews knew sufficient about the reputation of Ed Marlini and his gang to deduce that the Chicago man was probably not by any means as harmless as he looked.

Again, were the ties of blackmail as strong as he thought? Almost certainly not. It was one man's word against another, and Andrews knew perfectly well that he had not a shred of real, independent evidence. It was utterly impossible to prove that Unwin had ever been near Chancery Lane, and, what was more, Unwin must know this.

It is easy to threaten a respectable citizen with exposure, even if the offence is not actually criminal and even if there is no legal proof. Men of this stamp will often pay heavily, and go on paying, to prevent the circulation of gossip which might damage their reputation, harm their business or cause domestic trouble. But none of these reasons applied in the case of a Marlini gangster. Bluff had no hold on such a man without a definite backing of legal proof, and Unwin would certainly call the bluff as soon as it suited him to do so. Why, then, was he apparently content with his ignominious position? There were only two possible reasons. One was that he was hoping to get more out of the partnership than he put into it, and the other was retaliation for the hold-up in Chancery Lane. In either case he was an undesirable partner. Andrews did not regret having met

THE SÉANCE

him because of the useful information just disclosed—information which might have taken much time and labour to collect—but he was more and more convinced that their association had now served its purpose. But there was no great hurry, and it was safer to postpone the dissolution of the partnership to a more favourable opportunity.

On Monday afternoon the two men were busily occupied in preparing the same room for the weekly séance of the South Western London Spiritualist Society. Several months had elapsed since Mr. Andrews first attracted the attention of this society, and his first demonstration as a medium had been so prolific in manifestations and materialisations that its Research Committee had promptly contracted for a regular weekly engagement. For reasons of his own, not unconnected with certain cunningly disguised peculiarities of cabinet-making in his furniture, Mr. Andrews insisted on holding the séances on his own premises. His excuse was a tendency to asthma, which was aggravated on exposure to night air. His prestige and success as a medium were so great that the Research Committee, after consulting a full meeting of members, consented to this, although it was contrary to their usual custom.

The morning had been spent in discussing The Liberator, his probable whereabouts and the best means of tracing him. A number of

THE RAY OF DOOM

promising lines of inquiry had been thought out and approved or rejected according to their degree of merit. At last, when his guest's fertility of invention appeared to be exhausted, Mr. Andrews mentioned the séance which was to take place that evening. He had a reason for wanting to interest Unwin in these matters.

"Do you mind helping me to get the room ready?"

"Not a bit. I'd love to. And so you are really Durlacher?"

"Yes, that's my professional name."

Unwin's eyes shone with excitement. Strangely enough, considering his mode of life, he was an enthusiastic spiritualist. The name of Durlacher, the great medium, had long been familiar to him by reputation, for Andrews's exploits were reported in the journals on both sides of the Atlantic. He was supposed to be one of the most advanced exponents of spiritualism in the world.

"Proud to meet you, sir," said Mr. Unwin, and his tone was so sincere that Andrews was amazed. The revelation came only just in time, for the latter had already taken a sack from the cupboard. This sack was the one in which he was tied—up to the neck in it—while his materialisations were taking place. Knowing Unwin to be a crook he had been just on the point of making some jesting remark about his clients and the ease with which they were out-

THE SÉANCE

witted. He had in fact been relying on this introduction to rich and credulous people as a bait to entice his associate to the séance. Never for one moment had he suspected that Unwin would believe him to be on the level. But the incredible happened, yet one more proof of the facility with which mankind can reconcile knavery to any religion, and the medium was far too wily to dispel the illusion.

"I have used that sack," he said, and his voice unconsciously took on a more impressive quality, "upwards of four hundred times, and never once failed to materialise spirits. No, wait a minute, I did fail once, but I was ill at the time." A masterly touch, this, which cleverly avoided the assumption of infallibility.

Mr. Unwin fingered the coarse material reverently, as a mediæval baron, steeped in bloodshed and cruelty, might have handled the relics of his patron saint. He could almost sense the odour of sanctity in it, the presence of a mystical something with which such an object must be impregnated after so much hallowed usage. Andrews watched him with a smile—not the open frank smile which affects both sides of the mouth and shines forth from the eyes as a sign of fellowship and kindness, but a one-sided affair which left the eyes hard and steely and which boded no good.

"Would you like to come to the séance to-night?"

THE RAY OF DOOM

"Would I like to? I wouldn't miss it for worlds." As the speaker looked up the smile left Andrews's face and was replaced by a look of friendly interest, admirably counterfeited. The medium was highly satisfied. Instead of having to make a plausible excuse to get his victim to attend, here he was clamouring to be present. Naturally enough even the suspicious mind of Mr. Unwin could see no danger in it. True, he would be in a darkened room with the medium, who might or might not wish him harm, but he would not be alone, and in the presence of the spectators lay safety. Also, although he knew Andrews to be a crook, willing even to connive at the murder in the strong room, he trusted him implicitly in his capacity of Durlacher the medium, with the whole-hearted devotion so often paid to men of his stamp. All through the ages the medicine man, the witch doctor, the priest and the quack have inspired this trust and devotion, an endless tribute to the gullibility of mankind. No matter how often or how cruelly the trust is betrayed the tradition never dies.

Andrews smiled again as he guessed his victim's thoughts, but the smile had no humour in it.

The preparation of the room continued. The two men arranged the circle of chairs and rigged the tall cabinet of black material in which the medium was to be incarcerated. It was beautifully made of polished brass tubing, and the

THE SÉANCE

covering was of velvet, for nothing cheap was tolerated by the South Western Society. The table and slates were put out ready for use. The sack with its ropes and sealing-wax was placed on a chair. Mr. Unwin, the acolyte, was a most useful helper and the medium had very little to do. What little he did do was mostly in the way of concealment. There were many things which it was not desirable for a believer to see. A small bottle of alcohol, for instance, which Mr. Andrews hid in his waistcoat pocket. This was very useful, indeed indispensable, in the art of reading messages placed in sealed envelopes. Paper wetted with spirit instantly becomes transparent and reveals the secrets which it is supposed to conceal, and not only that, but it is restored to its original condition as soon as the spirit evaporates. A pair of extensible lazy tongs, which formed part of the cabinet equipment, was stowed under the edge of the hearth rug while Mr. Andrews was pretending to smooth down the folds of the velvet which covered the collapsible framework. These tongs did yeoman service in the darkness when the curtains were drawn and the medium was shut in, for by their aid tambourines could be played so far away from the cabinet that fraud was unsuspected.

The little table that was used for spirit rapping held no guilty secrets, and Unwin was permitted to clear away the tobacco jar from its

THE RAY OF DOOM

unpolished wooden top and dust it before placing it in position ready for use. No sign of trickery was to be found upon it, however minutely it was examined, for indeed it was but an ordinary table, purchased for four and elevenpence at a furniture shop in the next street. The workman who made it, an uncompromising Methodist, would be most surprised and annoyed if he had known that his handiwork was used for its present purpose. The secret of the never failing response to questions asked was simple and free from the risk of discovery. Under the lapel of Mr. Andrews's coat reposed a pin—a harmless and useful object such as might be found in many men's coats. There is perhaps nothing more innocent in all the world than a pin, and yet it formed part of a swindler's stock in trade. This pin was rather short and stout and of a black colour, which matched the shade of the table top. But there are millions of short black pins in the world, and Mr. Andrews did not mind in the least if this particular one was discovered during the perfunctory search which usually preceded his séances. It had in fact been discovered on several occasions and no comment made. No less a person than Gerald Lamson, the eminent playwright, had scratched his finger on it a few weeks before, but the trivial incident passed unnoticed. The secret of the table lay partly in this pin, but only partly.

THE SÉANCE

Mr. Andrews's signet ring also had its place in the swindle. It was a gold ring with the initials A.A. cut into the expanded seal, and its owner always wore it. On the inner or palm side of it, the side which is never seen or examined by anyone but the wearer, was a tiny slot cut in the metal. When Mr. Andrews began his table-turning performance it was child's play in the semi-darkness to stick the pin into the top of the table, which was covered with a carved pattern so that the tiny marks would not show. It was then well pressed home with the seal of the ring, and the medium's hand placed flat on the surface, palm downwards. This was ample proof to his clients that he had nothing to do with any liftings or rockings of the table which took place. Hands flat on a flat surface cannot tilt a table. So ran the plausible argument, which deceived many who ought to have known better, many who posed as experts when they were really ignorant of the first principles of quackery. Of course the thing was simple enough. All the medium had to do was to slip the slot of his ring over the head of the pin. . . . But all this was hidden from Mr. Unwin.

At seven o'clock the audience began to arrive. The South-Western London Spiritualist Society was a small and select body which charged high subscriptions for membership. Mr. Andrews knew this and fixed his fees accordingly. He

THE RAY OF DOOM

knew that rich people with nothing to do prefer to pay heavily for their purchases and judge quality almost entirely by the scale of prices which they have to pay. Gerald Lamson, the playwright, was the first to arrive. He was a curious combination of mystic and business man. His writing-room was severely decorated and fitted up in the Spartan style affected by twentieth century office furnishers. Here, with the aid of a highly efficient shorthand-typist, who was responsible for more of his success than he ever imagined, he contrived to get through his output of six plays a year by working about an hour a day. From theatres and film companies his royalties poured in, for all he wrote he sold and nearly all of it was very successful. Even his least effective plays did pretty well in book form, for once a man becomes a best seller there is a wonderful market open to him in cheap editions, presentation editions, numbered and autographed copies and so on. His income was enormous, quite out of proportion to the amount of work required to earn it, and his very considerable leisure was wholly occupied in an attempt to spend it, or that part of it which remained after deduction of income tax and super tax. Every new religion, every bizarre sect and coterie of food faddists and hygienic cranks was sure of his enthusiastic support—for a time. He was a godsend to the illustrated papers.

THE SÉANCE

For all his businesslike behaviour he was a crank, a mere gullible simpleton, as eccentric as the comic paper poet and the Chelsea artist of fiction. His eccentricity consisted in being as consciously and conscientiously unlike them as possible. But for the mere accident of his success he would have been as lazy and improvident. He was lazy and improvident, but laziness did not matter when his small output sold at fantastically high prices, and improvidence was of little importance when his bank balance automatically renewed itself from the generous stream of his inflowing royalties. And so he was able to indulge in steel furniture in his office and pretend that he was a hard worker.

"Artistic temperament?" he would say scornfully to interviewers, his hand resting on the tube of a dictagraph which he never used. "Bah! Another name for sheer idleness. No creative artist can afford to wait for inspiration. He must work at his art—must go and search for subjects instead of waiting helplessly for them to come to him."

This was largely true, and sounded particularly impressive when backed by photographs of Mr. Lamson at his desk with a background of telephones and filing cabinets. Interviewers always laid stress on the workmanlike atmosphere of his study, and implied that he almost lived in it. And the cream of the joke was

THE RAY OF DOOM

that Mr. Lamson had heard it and read it so often that he had come to believe it to be true. Although he wrote the wittiest plays in London he had no sense of humour.

He brought with him to the séance Russell Emerson, a retired Civil Servant who had inherited half a million from his aunt and who was investing some of it in the production of Lamson's plays. They were followed by a dozen other men and women of no particular interest. All of them were fairly rich, all of them respectable and all of them fervent believers in Mr. Andrews's mystic powers. At the beginning of the latter's engagement by the Society, Mr. Lamson, businesslike as ever, had suggested and arranged for a test séance in order to settle once and for all the integrity of the medium. Mr. Andrews met this request with patient resignation and a look of quiet martyrdom, and blandly demanded a double fee to compensate for the affront. Their appetites whetted by the marvellous display which they had already seen, the Research Committee, composed of Lamson and two other almost equally unpractical individuals, closed with the offer. Mr. Lamson engaged an elderly scientist as investigator, and he was as clay in the hands of the potter when Andrews's skill and experience were turned loose upon him. From that time onwards the medium never had a moment's trouble with his thoroughly docile

THE SÉANCE

congregation. Their regard for him was increased by the difficulties he placed in their way. If he had charged low fees and allowed anyone to employ him or shown any eagerness for engagements they would have accepted him at his own lowly valuation and ignored him. As it was they cheerfully paid his exorbitant demands, journeyed out to his inconveniently situated house without complaint—and were sometimes turned away. For one of his stipulations was that the names of all present should be submitted to the approval of the spirits before each séance began. Sometimes the spirits, as represented by Mr. Andrews's signet ring, refused to permit the attendance of one or other of the visitors, in which case the session did not begin until he left. The fear of ignominious dismissal at the caprice of the unseen world acted not as a deterrent but as a powerful attraction. The pleasing uncertainty of it and the rigidity with which this rule was enforced was altogether novel to his patrons. Long accustomed to getting anything they wanted without difficulty, the sensation of something inaccessible was a piquant stimulus to their jaded appetites.

On this particular evening the spirits did not blackball anybody, to the manifest relief of the whole company. All the sixteen chairs were occupied.

"Will you put the lights out, Unwin?" said

THE RAY OF DOOM

Andrews, on the stroke of nine o'clock. Unwin got up, turned the switch and went back to his seat. The blinds were down, so the room was nearly in darkness, especially near the fire-place, where stood the chair reserved for the medium. Only at the other side of the circle of intent figures was the faint glow of a heavily-muffled lamp sufficient to illuminate the shadowy outlines of the seekers after knowledge.

Mr. Andrews had another peculiarity in the conduct of his séances. He would never keep to a prearranged programme or condescend to allow any of the audience to choose the items. He always insisted on free and unfettered discretion in these matters; not for any special reason, but merely in accordance with his general principle of impressing his clients and dragooning them into proper discipline. He even arranged the order in which they were to sit. Each chair was neatly ticketed beforehand with the name of its occupant, and this order was only varied when some person or persons were temporarily rejected and shut out from the benefit of his ministrations by the preliminary appeal to the world of spirits. If anyone insisted on the order being changed he refused to recognise the session as an ordinary one and promptly classed it as an investigation into his *bona fides*, to be charged for at double rates.

Mr. Lamson was sitting on Andrews's left

THE SÉANCE

hand and Russell Emerson had the post of honour on his right. Mr. Unwin was sitting immediately opposite, on the other side of the circle. Just above his head was the shaded light which formed the only illumination, apart from a faint glow from the fire. The silence was broken by the deep voice of the medium.

"The first demonstration this evening will be to produce materialisations whilst we are sitting in a closed circle. Will everybody present hold hands so as to make an unbroken chain? It is very important that the contact is everywhere complete and continuous, so the ladies must remove their gloves."

There was a pause of half a minute to allow these instructions to be carried out.

"Is the circle now complete?"

An affirmatory murmur ran round the room. Mr. Unwin was holding hands with Mr. Courland, the senior partner in a big firm of solicitors, and with Miss Susan Witt, the author, whose principal claim to fame was, as *The Week-end Review* said, "six novels full of sex."

"No, no," said Andrews to Russell Emerson, who was trying to grasp his hand. "I do not form an integral part of the circle, although I shall of course be in contact with it. You hold hands with Mr. Lamson, please. Now, are you all ready? Yes. Then I will hold Mr. Lamson's arm with one hand and Mr. Emerson's with the other—thus. It works better that

THE RAY OF DOOM

way. You have no doubt about it, gentlemen, I suppose ? ”

“ No. None at all,” replied Lamson.

“ No,” said Emerson. “ I can feel you holding me all right.”

“ Very good. You will know at once if I leave go, so that will exclude the possibility of my taking part—bodily part—in any materialisations which may take place. Please inform the company at once, gentlemen, if you feel my grip slacken in the slightest degree. I want it to be proved beyond doubt that my hands are accounted for the whole time. Now keep as still as possible and do not on any account break the circle. Any sudden disconnection might be very dangerous to me.”

The medium's voice died away and there was absolute silence. Presently Andrews's chair creaked and his breathing was audible, coming in quick, sobbing gasps. His grip tightened upon the arms of his neighbours. Then he spoke in a high-pitched tone, altogether different from his normal sonorous bass. The habitués recognised the voice at once as that of Flora, one of his controls, a visitor from the other world who was notorious for her uncertain temper. On one occasion she had thrown a tambourine at Miss Witt and upset a heavy table on to Mr. Lamson's toe.

“ There is a scoffer present, an unbeliever.” Mr. Unwin was shocked to think that such

THE SÉANCE

people could exist in the face of the evidence.

“ The spirits have warned him before—they now warn him for the last time and take their vengeance upon him.”

A stifled shriek rang through the room and died away into a horrible bubbling groan. Heels drummed upon the carpet in agony, and there was a soft thud as if someone had fallen out of his chair. Miss Susan Witt screamed aloud, and Mr. Courland jumped to his feet. Startled exclamations and cries of fear arose from all parts of the room.

The medium was the first to recover himself. Releasing his grip upon the arms of his companions he dashed across the room and switched on the lights. The stricken figure of Mr. Unwin lay huddled in front of his empty chair, and a little red puddle spread sluggishly over the carpet under the eyes of the horrified spectators. The handle of a knife protruded stiffly and horribly from the upturned throat of the dead man—for dead he certainly was, to judge by the livid greyness of his face and the limp sagging of his jaw.

“ Telephone for a doctor, somebody,” cried Andrews. “ The telephone is on the desk there. And for the police. Nobody must leave the room until they come.”

He strode forward and bent over the motionless figure on the floor.

“ Anybody know anything about first aid ? ”

THE RAY OF DOOM

Mr. Lamson was already on the phone, galvanised into activity by the personality of the medium, who dominated the horror-stricken assembly as a sheepdog rules its flock. The playwright's fingers shook so that he could hardly dial the number he wanted.

The case was evidently beyond the scope of first aid, and all that could be done, after Miss Susan Witt had confessed herself baffled—for she was the only one present who knew anything of the art—was to place a tablecloth over the mortal remains of Mr. Unwin to avoid lacerating harrowed feelings still further.

"The doctor's coming straight away," announced Mr. Lamson. "He'll be here in about five minutes. Now, which is the nearest police station?"

"Wait a minute," said Andrews. "There's a policeman next door. At least he's more than a policeman, he's an inspector. I'll see if I can get him. It'll be quicker." By this time, of course, Andrews knew of Drury's escape from the strong room, though he did not know how it had been effected. He went across to the window and pulled up the blind. The whirr of a lawn mower was audible through the open window, and the sweet smell of freshly cut grass drifted into the room. The peaceful colours of a lovely sunset were spreading across the sky outside, throwing into vivid contrast the tragic scene within.

THE SÉANCE

"Inspector!" shouted Mr. Andrews.

The lawn mower stopped, and Drury looked up, shading his eyes with his bare arm.

"Can you come up here at once? Somebody's been killed. It's all right. He's coming," added the medium, turning to the anxious listeners and shutting down the window.

Footsteps were heard on the stairs and there was a knock on the door. Mr. Andrews opened it and Drury came in, coatless and with his shirt sleeves rolled up.

"What's up?" he asked. "An accident?"

"Not exactly," said Andrews, who naturally assumed the office of spokesman for the frightened company, none of whom were used to the realities of life—and death. Drury went across to the inert figure on the floor and lifted the tablecloth. He gave a little whistle of astonishment.

"What happened?" he asked, and again it was a tribute to Mr. Andrews's personality that the question was addressed to him.

"We were all sitting round in these chairs and—it just happened."

"What do you mean?" Drury spoke with some irritation.

"We couldn't see exactly. The room was nearly dark. We were in the middle of a séance, and all I know is that he suddenly screamed. When we turned the lights up we

THE RAY OF DOOM

found him like this. Just as you see him. Nothing has been moved at all."

"I see. Does anybody else know any more about it?" There was a general shaking of heads and no reply. "Who was sitting next to him?"

"I was," replied Courland. His clients would not have recognised him at this moment. In place of the imposing silver-haired man who dealt so suavely and so judicially with the affairs of great families and estates, there was a doddering wreck who had grown ten years older in the last five minutes. His carefully brushed white hair was disarranged for the first time in human memory, and patches of bald head showed through its sleek glossiness, patches which were usually concealed from view with great care and consummate artistry. His well-known chin, noted for its resolute and determined prominence, seemed to have lost its firmness of outline in a mass of flabby and wrinkled skin.

"I was," repeated Mr. Courland shakily. His face was an unhealthy putty colour, and he seemed to be on the verge of collapse. "And Miss Witt here. All I know is that Mr. Unwin screamed and fell forward. His hand, which was holding mine, relaxed as he did so."

Miss Witt corroborated this in every detail and had nothing to add except a few hysterical sobs.

Drury looked at the knife handle which stuck

THE SÉANCE

up so oddly and so grotesquely above the dead man's collar. Suicide? Why should a man kill himself in the middle of a roomful of people? More important still, how could he kill himself when two witnesses testified that his hands were holding theirs at the time? Again, suicides do not drive knives up to the hilt into their necks. They invariably cut rather than stab.

The next step was to find out whose hands had been free and able to do the deed.

"Was there anybody else in the room?"

"No." It was Mr. Lamson who spoke. The medium had withdrawn into the background a little. Perhaps he thought he had been talking too much. "Nobody has left the room and nobody has entered it except yourself since it happened."

"Will you all sit down again exactly as you were before? Please remember that I cannot compel you to do this, but if you are agreeable it may help to find out what really did take place."

With much shuffling of feet everyone resumed their chairs, Drury taking possession of the vacant one. Once more the chain of hands was formed, this time with the blinds up. The inspector looked round and saw that every person present held the hands of two others, with the exception of Mr. Andrews, who was exactly facing him. The medium's chair was drawn back a little behind the others and he sat

THE RAY OF DOOM

with his hands gripping the arms of his immediate neighbours.

"I may as well tell you at once," began Andrews, "that I am a skilled knife thrower. I used to do it on the stage for a living. If anybody in the world has the skill to do that"—he jerked his head in the direction of his late associate—"I have."

"I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence——" said Drury, scenting a confession.

"Wait until I've finished," was the cool reply. "All I said was that I could have thrown that knife perhaps better than anyone else in the world, if I had wanted to. But why should I want to? Mr. Unwin was no enemy of mine, and besides, it was humanly impossible for me to do it. These two gentlemen here can swear that my hands never left hold of their arms. Isn't that so?" he added, turning to his white-faced audience. Mr. Emerson and Gerald Lamson nodded assent.

"Yes," said the latter. "I can swear to it, if need be. You took hold of my arm just after the lights were turned off, and Mr. Unwin himself turned them off, so we know he was all right then."

"When did you leave go?" asked Drury.

"When everybody else did, after the shriek."

"I can say the same," said Mr. Emerson emphatically. "No doubt about it whatever."

THE SÉANCE

Besides, I don't see why we should suspect Mr. Durlacher. The idea is absurd."

Mr. Durlacher, as he was known to the West London Society, again began to speak.

"This is quite a usual procedure with us," he began. "Forming a circle, I mean, of course. I hold my neighbours' arms so that there can be no question of fraud, so that my hands can have nothing to do with any manifestations which may occur. Needless to say, if I relaxed my grip for a single moment it would be detected at once. Personally, I think that knife was thrown by no human agency but by the hand of a spirit."

A murmur of excited agreement went round the circle of sitters. They had many times seen and heard musical instruments floating and playing in the air above their heads while everyone's hands were accounted for in the manner described; and if musical instruments could be moved by the agency of spirits, why not weapons?

"By Jove, yes," exclaimed Gerald Lamson. "Don't you remember the warning?"

"What warning?" asked Andrews.

"Oh, of course you wouldn't know about it. You were in a trance. Flora was speaking and said there was an unbeliever present. She warned him for the last time and then—it happened."

"Oh," said Andrews. "And I suppose Flora

THE RAY OF DOOM

threw the knife because she was materialised through my agency and I happen to be a good knife thrower. A sort of bodily sympathy, or an extension of that particular accomplishment of mine to a spirit *en rapport* with me. So in a way I am innocently responsible for that poor man's death. It's a terrible thing to think about, but if she had wanted to kill him she would have done it somehow, and I couldn't have prevented it. That's one consolation anyhow."

Drury was rather bewildered by all this jargon. The one thing that seemed clear was that no one in the room could have done it if the witnesses were to be believed. And yet someone in the room had done it. That was the essential fact to which his mind clung and from which it refused to be diverted. He attached no importance whatever to other-world agencies as a cause of homicide.

The medium had gratuitously admitted that he could throw knives; probably, almost certainly, he was the only one in the room who could. From a mundane point of view Flora could be excluded, and there remained three possibilities. Suicide seemed highly improbable, so much so that it could be ruled out altogether. That left two alternatives. The responsibility for the act rested between the medium, who alone was capable of using a knife at a distance, and the dead man's immediate neighbours, who were near enough

THE SÉANCE

to stab him, if the hand-holding difficulty could be surmounted. And surmounted it must be. For Flora was not an explanation which would be received with any enthusiasm at Scotland Yard.

Why should Andrews or Durlacher, or whatever his name was, be so anxious to proclaim the fact that he was a knife thrower? Was it merely cool common sense on his part, in order to avoid trouble later on if his past history was investigated, or was it cunning frankness hiding something behind it? If he was innocent it was certainly wise of him to mention his proficiency in this unusual art as soon as possible, but not many men would have the sense to see this. If he was guilty his apparent frankness was merely a blind intended to raise a presumption of innocence, for he must know that his music-hall career would sooner or later come to light, and would tell heavily against him if concealed. Nothing wrecks a murderer's defence more frequently than concealment of facts which are afterwards discovered and brought up against him, facts which would have done him very little harm if they had only been confessed at first.

There was nothing to choose between the two hypotheses, and they were far overshadowed in importance by the present impossibility of proving anybody guilty. Drury was not out to frame up a case against the medium, prejudiced though he was against all the tribe. Nor

THE RAY OF DOOM

was he prepared to accuse any of the medium's clients without strong *prima facie* evidence. But here was a dead man in a roomful of people, not one of whom could be guilty according to their stories. Some theory had to be formed as a working basis, even if it were quite wrong.

But the first essential was to solve the mystery of the closed circle. Until that was done it was useless to speculate on motives or identities. Drury was silent as he pondered this apparently insoluble problem. Oblivious to his surroundings and to his disreputable gardening clothes, he sat in his chair with his feet wide apart to clear the grim obstruction in front of him. The silence grew unbearable, and a jerky, uneasy attempt at conversation flickered into life around him. Miss Witt produced a tiny notebook and scribbled her impressions of the scene while they were yet fresh and clear cut in her memory. She subsequently brought a similar incident into her next novel and earned high praise for the burning realism of her descriptions. Mr. Courland was attempting to explain to Emerson the legal aspects of homicide, as far as he remembered them, which was not saying much, for his practice had been exclusively confined to more peaceful and less harrowing pursuits.

Then Drury remembered a book on séances which he had once read, a book which described and exposed so much of the knavery practised

THE SÉANCE

by professional mediums that he had ever since classed them in his own mind with confidence-trick men. He suddenly understood how it was done—understood to the uttermost farthing, and was amazed at the cold-blooded ingenuity of it. He got up and walked across the room to Mr. Andrews, who was engaged in expounding his homicidal-spirit theory to the receptive ears of Gerald Lamson. As he passed the door the inspector quietly turned the key in the lock and dropped it into his pocket. Nobody noticed his action, for they were all far too interested in Mr. Andrews's deep, musical voice as it boomed on in the sonorous phrases which he knew how to use so well and so effectively.

Drury gently put his hands under the side pockets of the medium's coat; they felt very heavy, and the outline of some hard objects was distinctly visible through the cloth.

"Mr. Andrews, will you allow me to have a look at the contents of your pockets?"

The spell was broken. At once the devotees returned from their world of ectoplasms and projected personalities to the reality of death and its investigation. Mr. Andrews drew himself up to his full height and put on his most majestic expression, that look of hauteur and righteous innocence which had so often dispersed doubts and converted sceptics into enthusiasts.

"No, certainly not. Why should I?"

"Because I believe them to contain something

THE RAY OF DOOM

important, something which will explain this mysterious death."

"Oh, don't be absurd, Inspector," interposed Mr. Courland. Perhaps he was unconsciously biased by the extreme informality of Drury's attire. "We didn't ask you here to insult us. I would vouch for Mr. Durlacher's integrity as for my own."

"I must ask you not to interfere," said Drury, politely but firmly, turning to the solicitor. Mr. Courland's face flushed crimson. He was not accustomed to being "told off," even politely. If it had been a High Court Judge in robes and gown—but a man in shirt sleeves and grey flannel trousers. . . .

"This is outrageous!" he blustered. "I shall report your behaviour to my friend the Commissioner."

"I should not advise you to do so, sir," replied Drury quietly. "The Commissioner always backs up his men so long as they do not exceed their duty."

Mr. Courland did not reply. The solicitor in him began to realise that his spiritualistic enthusiasm was putting him in a false position. There was a sound of hurried footsteps and a frenzied rattling. Drury turned hastily and saw Mr. Andrews at the door, twisting and pulling at the knob with all his might. He blessed the forethought which had caused him to lock it.

THE SÉANCE

"It's no good," he said, as he stepped forward to the medium. "You can either let me see your pockets now or come along to the nearest police station and have them examined there."

Mr. Andrews sank into a chair with his face as white as chalk and his knees shaking beneath him. Little beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and his eyes were full of a deadly fear. Gone was all his calmness of demeanour and the majestic bearing which had enabled him to overawe the members of the West London Spiritualist Society.

He put his trembling hands into his pockets and pulled out two small, heavy objects, which he held out to the inspector with a gesture of despair.

"It's all up with me now," he groaned. "I see you know all these dodges. I did it right enough."

"I don't understand," said Mr. Emerson shakily. "Are we to believe . . . ? It's incredible. And what have these things got to do with it ?"

"A great deal," said Drury, putting his trophies down on the table. "With the aid of these innocent-looking things he killed a man and nearly got off scot-free. Will you ring up the nearest police station, please ?"

CHAPTER XVI

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

"WHAT a glutton you are!" said McCarthy, when Drury reported the death of Mr. Unwin and the arrest of his murderer. "Haven't you got enough on with The Liberator without dropping in for casual murder cases as well?"

"Quite enough, sir, but I couldn't help it. It happened next door to my house, and they pulled me straight into it. Anyhow, it is really part of The Liberator's case."

"Oh, how's that?"

The inspector told him the whole story, for Andrews had broken down completely after his arrest, and had made a long statement explaining his relations with the dead man and with Drury himself. What upset him more than anything was his incredibly bad luck in coming up against one of the few police officers in the country who had made a study of mediumistic frauds. He did not expect official credence to be given to his theory of Flora as an assassin, but he did expect perfect safety from his ingenious hand-holding alibi. If any other policeman had taken charge he

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

would assuredly have had the chance to get rid of the damning contents of his pockets, and then it would not have mattered if someone had suspected the method afterwards, because there could be no proof to set against the testimony of his two unimpeachable witnesses.

"Well, Unwin's not much loss to society," said McCarthy, when Drury had finished. "Andrews won't be, either. There's just one thing I don't quite see, though. How could Andrews throw the knife? Were these other two chaps in with him?"

"Oh, no, sir. They were quite honest in saying that he'd never left go of their arms. They were wrong, of course, but they didn't know it until I showed them how it was done."

Drury handed over to McCarthy two bent plates of sheet lead.

"That's how he worked it, sir. He had one of these plates in each hand—they're cut to a nice convenient size for holding—and clamped them gently on to their arms when he took hold. Then he could use his hands freely in the dark, while the pressure of the lead convinced the other people that his hands were still there. It's an old dodge. Dates back to the eighteen-seventies."

The Chief Constable nodded his head appreciatively. He was familiar with a vast range of tricks and ruses employed by criminals

THE RAY OF DOOM

of all sorts, but spiritualism was new ground to him, and he was always willing to learn.

"Well, that's disposed of your competitors very nicely. They've cancelled each other out, so you've got the field to yourself. Want to hear the latest?"

"Please."

"Those three cheques The Liberator drew before he left were used to buy tickets to Yokohama, Auckland and Rio de Janeiro. We've got the names of the ships and the cabin numbers from the steamship companies, so we can lay our hands on those people any time we like. One of them is Mrs. Playfair, and she sailed for Auckland, New Zealand, in the Brown Funnel liner *Waltham Abbey* three weeks ago. The second is George Brand, in the *Nigeria*, due to arrive at Yokohama on April 23rd, and the last one is a man called Manville Green. He sailed for Rio ten days since. You'd better have a copy of those names, by the way. If you remember . . ."

McCarthy produced the map which Drury had found in the safe deposit deed box, "those circles drawn on it, which we didn't understand at the time, are drawn round these three places. The fourth circle is in the north of England. Well, The Liberator says in his cipher message—or code message, whichever it is. I can never remember the difference—that they each have a quarter of the earth's

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

surface to deal with. That fits in all right. There are four of them, including himself, so we don't seem to have missed any. He's stopping here, apparently, and has sent these three others out armed with his apparatus. Cranks, I suppose, like himself. I couldn't make out why he'd picked those particular places. According to the ordinary map they seem to be chosen rather badly."

Drury had the map—Mercator's projection—before him.

"I see what you mean, sir. There seem to be lots of better places if he wanted to divide the world up into four quarters."

"Yes, but then I remembered that globe which we found at his house. That gives you a much better idea of it. This map is all out of proportion, of course. It's a flat sheet which is trying to represent a curved surface—the whole of a sphere, in fact—and it's bound to be distorted."

The two men got up and went across to The Liberator's globe, which stood on a side table.

"Now you can see his idea," said McCarthy, pointing to the brass rings which encircled the globe both horizontally and vertically. "These rings divide the earth up into four quadrants, and as the polar axis is not vertical but inclined the quadrants look rather peculiar when they are transferred to an ordinary map. This one,

THE RAY OF DOOM

for instance," and McCarthy rotated the globe until England was in a central position in the top left-hand quadrant, "seems to be the area which The Liberator has reserved for himself. It includes most of Western civilisation—the whole of Europe and Asia as far as longitude 75° East—roughly a line running through Omsk southwards over the Pamirs and bisecting India. It also covers the North Atlantic and North America up to 105° West, that is rather more than half of it. The dividing line on the south slopes across the Equator from the Gulf of Mexico to Madagascar, so it includes about three-quarters of Africa as well. England is just about in the centre of it and it contains a bigger land area than any of the other quarters. The southern quadrant corresponding to this covers all South America, the South Atlantic and South Africa."

"Looks as if it would be difficult to get any central point there," observed Drury, contemplating the light blue patch of ocean which occupied all the middle of the quadrant.

"Yes. The most central place is Tristan da Cunha." McCarthy put his finger on a tiny dot in the South Atlantic. "And that happens to be the most inaccessible inhabited land in the world. It's four thousand miles from Cape Horn, and two thousand west of the Cape of Good Hope. The nearest land is fifteen hundred miles away, and then it's only St. Helena.

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

What a place to live in! So that's why he chose Rio. It's not very central but it's the best spot available."

The Chief Constable spun the globe and checked it after half a revolution.

"Here's number three section. North again. The centre is Yokohama and it covers all eastern Asia with China and Japan, the North Pacific ocean and western North America. Plenty of inhabitants there. The south quarter of this side of the globe takes in Australia and New Zealand, New Guinea and the South Pacific. Auckland is the centre. There's a devil of a lot of water down here, isn't there? Australia looks like a pebble in a pond."

"He's got his plans pretty well cut and dried," said Drury.

"Yes. The thing we want to find out now is his own station—you know something about that, don't you? Some place with a weird name. I've forgotten it for the moment."

"Nont Sarah's? Yes, I know it well. I've been past it many a time when I was stationed in Yorkshire."

"That's the place. And the second thing is, when is the balloon going up? It's no good watching Nont Sarah's if we don't know who we're looking for—and we don't. But if we can find out his zero hour then we know that anybody seen there at that time must be roped in."

THE RAY OF DOOM

"It's leaving it very late, sir. It's running a fearful risk."

"Damn it, I know that. But what else can we do? We can't look for a man we've never seen on a busy road like that. It is busy, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. It's very bleak and desolate, but it's one of the main roads over the Pennine Chain from Yorkshire into Lancashire, and there's a lot of traffic on it."

"Very well then. What are you going to do? Stop everybody who goes along that road during the next month and ask him if he's The Liberator?"

Drury laughed at the absurdity of it. "No. It'll have to be left till the last minute, as you say, sir. After all, it isn't such a risk as I thought at first. If the three other people can be caught during their voyages or directly they land, it doesn't matter much if The Liberator succeeds in sterilising his quarter of the earth. Sir James Martin said that definitely in his last article. So long as any part of the world escapes then the bacterial balance will soon be restored owing to their powers of rapid multiplication. He was very emphatic about it. Said that The Liberator could only do permanent harm by complete and simultaneous sterilisation of the whole earth. But even so, he must be caught sooner or later, because he'll try it on again if he fails this time."

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

"Quite. The next thing then is to find out his zero hour. Any suggestions?"

"No, sir."

"Oh, come, Drury, that's not worthy of you!"

"That's all very well, sir, but this is all new to me. I haven't had time to think about it yet."

"All right. I have, so I'll give you a lead. Remember that cipher message? He says he'll send them a cable to tell them about zero hour. Wonder why he didn't put it in the message itself?"

"Perhaps he wanted to be sure they'd all got to their stations first. After all, if one of them didn't get there in time for some reason or other, and the rest of them made their exposures at a prearranged time in spite of it, it would spoil the whole thing from their point of view."

"Perhaps so. Anyway, all we've got to do is to get copies of every wireless message sent to these ships and of all code cables to Japan, New Zealand and South America. Perhaps we'd better say all cables, because he mightn't use code. Then we're sure to get it unless he's sent it already. If he has we'll have to persuade one of his agents to talk."

"Sounds good enough," admitted Drury. "The only thing is, what about authority to demand the copies? And how can you arrest

THE RAY OF DOOM

the people he's sent out? They haven't committed any legal offence."

"Oh, that'll be all right. Remember, this isn't a petty theft, or even a murder case. It's something a damned sight more important. We haven't got our hands tied now. I tell you, Drury, we can get powers for anything, anything, so far as The Liberator is concerned. The Home Office is getting fearfully jumpy about it, and not only the Home Office but the Government." He paused a moment to let this sink in. "And not only our Government but others as well. Things are a dashed sight worse than the papers say—and that's bad enough. They've got a rigid censorship on all U.S. and South American news and that shows there's something happening. The Commissioner told me this morning that we could have whatever we wanted. We've only got to ask for it. If these people aren't doing anything we can arrest them for legally, then we've got to arrest them just the same, and they're putting a special bill through Parliament to cover it. That's a definite promise from the Prime Minister. He's been here this morning. And if there isn't time to do it then he guarantees an act of indemnity afterwards. And they've started a world conference about it, so that it can be added to international law as a sort of super-piracy or something. Oh, yes, you can take it from me that they're

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

all thoroughly scared and prepared to do anything to back us up if we'll only get hold of The Liberator. You won't be hauled up before the magistrate for wrongful arrest if you catch him and haven't got a warrant in your pocket. For the first time in your young life you can throw your weight about a bit, if you want to."

By this time grave dissatisfaction, amounting in some instances to virulent abuse, was becoming evident in the columns of the daily press. Scotland Yard had been so reticent about the whole case that little or no progress seemed to have been made. Some of the more sober journals repeatedly printed semi-official scraps of news, but it was all very vague and indefinite. "It is understood on good authority that the police investigation is progressing favourably"—that was the type of unsatisfactory consolation offered to an alarmed public clamouring for exact information. There were some who believed these mildly optimistic clichés, and they were aggrieved because details were not given; there were many more, mindful of the frantic lies which passed muster during the war under the name of propaganda, who refused to believe, and they were even more vociferous. The *Daily Wire* invited the Government to resign; an invitation which was not complied with. The *Weekly Organiser* advised that Scotland Yard should be disbanded

THE RAY OF DOOM

and its personnel entirely replaced ; but it did not explain where competent substitutes were to be found. Scores of amateur detectives wrote to the papers expounding their theories of The Liberator's identity and their methods of tracing him. No two of the theories were the same, and the methods varied from the ridiculous to the frankly impossible.

The excitement and uneasiness grew to such a pitch that the Prime Minister requested the Home Secretary to publish a few of Scotland Yard's less important discoveries. But on McCarthy's advice the Commissioner refused to sanction any leakage whatever, and Mr. Herdman had the good sense to let the matter drop.

"It isn't just pig-headedness on our part," the Commissioner explained to the Home Secretary, "but it really is necessary. We haven't much to go upon and the little we have got will be lost if The Liberator gets to know what we're doing."

"Yes, I quite see that," replied Mr. Ripponden. "But then I know the facts. The trouble is to convince other people who don't know them. Heaven knows I'm not grumbling. I think you've done very well indeed."

"Thank you, sir. May I pass that on? It will cheer them up a bit. They are getting a bit tired of this constant criticism."

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

"Do, by all means. And we'll promise the press a full explanation if you succeed." And with that the public had to be content.

Questions were asked in Parliament, and answered in the traditional manner with carefully phrased replies which conveyed no information whatever. But behind the scenes the work still went on. As a *Times* leader pointed out, the Scotland Yard officers who were responsible for the investigation knew perfectly well that their own lives were at stake as well as those of the rest of the world. If this stimulus did not induce them to put forward their best efforts nothing else would. And it went on to suggest, reasonably enough, that the chorus of condemnation and criticism should stop. It could do no good, and merely acted as a deterrent and discouragement.

Arrangements had already been made for copies of all the necessary cables and wireless messages to be sent to Scotland Yard by the companies concerned. This meant a tremendous burden of work in examining them. But it was work gladly undertaken, for reasons pointed out by *The Times*, and it was work which ultimately carried its own reward.

And now the wisdom of the official policy became apparent. So far as was known The Liberator, after his escape from Laburnum Terrace, had every reason to think that he was secure. His personal appearance was

THE RAY OF DOOM

unknown, except through the medium of vague descriptions. He had severed his connection with his house and simply disappeared—a mere inconspicuous unit among the forty million inhabitants of Britain. So long as he believed himself safe from pursuit there was a chance for the pursuers, but if he once knew the lines upon which they were working and the progress they had made he could regulate his plans accordingly and the chances of finding him would be small indeed.

The secret of the cipher had been well kept, and not a word of its existence, much less its solution, had ever been published. Outside police head-quarters its discovery was known only to three men—the King, Mr. Herdman and the Home Secretary.

McCarthy was in daily expectation of intercepting the all-important messages, and Superintendent Ellison agreed with him. The Liberator, argued the cipher expert, was a clever man in his own way; he was also a madman. Which two things are not necessarily incompatible. But in some ways he showed the simplicity of his nature, and it was that of the ordinary man in the street. His naïve confidence in the security of his code, as shown by the message left undestroyed, was identical with the mentality of hundreds of diplomats and soldiers. To a person who knows nothing of cryptography a code which looks difficult

THE FOUR QUARTERS OF THE EARTH

is difficult; and hecatombs of men have perished in time of war owing to this mistaken belief.

Therefore, in Ellison's opinion, The Liberator would probably use his code again, thus making his message easily recognisable. If any hint of its decipherment were allowed to leak out he would be forewarned and might conceivably get his instructions through in some apparently innocent guise.

For a week the censorship of cables and telegrams continued without result, but on the eighth day three of them, coded in six-figure groups, came to hand. In a few minutes their meaning was torn from them by means of the waiting dictionary. That addressed to Mrs. Playfair, at Auckland, instructed her to begin her two-hour exposure at eleven-forty on Thursday morning, May 30th. George Brand was to do the same in Yokohama at 9.20, while Manville Green, whose station was Rio, was to begin at eight minutes past nine on Wednesday evening, May 29th.

Armed with these facts, McCarthy and Drury went to the library and consulted an atlas. The usual map of the world sprinkled with little clocks was soon found, and a comparison of local times showed that the three different hours mentioned in the cablegrams represented the same moment, which corresponded with midnight on Wednesday, Greenwich Mean Time,

THE RAY OF DOOM

or 1 a.m. Thursday, according to Summer Time.

"So there you are at last," said McCarthy. "All fixed for your appointment at Nont Sarah's. Now we've got to think out a method of catching him. It's got to be absolutely certain—no loopholes in it anywhere—and yet there mustn't be anything to frighten him away."

CHAPTER XVII

NONT SARAH'S

ON the morning of the twenty-eighth of May, Drury and McCarthy arrived at Huddersfield in one of Scotland Yard's fastest cars.

"Before we introduce ourselves we'll go and spy out the land, I think," said McCarthy, when they got to the middle of the town. "I'd like to get a general idea of the place and compare it with the map. Then we can arrange for assistance afterwards. I don't want to go to the local Chief knowing nothing about the place."

"Right you are, sir," and Drury swung his wheel to follow a tram labelled Outlane. "It's a long time since I was here, but I think I can find the way if we get on the right tram lines."

As soon as they cleared the thick traffic he passed his lumbering guide, and the tyres boomed and roared as he accelerated. For a mile or two the street ran between continuous ramparts of houses and shops, uphill most of the way. Then the shops thinned out and gaps began to appear between the houses,

THE RAY OF DOOM

through which glimpses of trees and fields were visible. Presently they were out of the town on to the rolling slopes beyond, and there were no more trees. Far away in all directions nothing could be seen but hills and valleys. Fold after fold of ground, none of it level, which carried tucked away in its hollows and recesses scores of towns of all sizes.

On the map the West Riding of Yorkshire is so thickly sprinkled with them that it is almost impossible to find room for their names; when actually traversing the district it is difficult to visualise this, for the contour of the ground is so uneven that one can look across vast stretches of country without seeing the towns. But they are there, for the map does not lie, and four million people live in them; for the most part drab and rather dirty places. Granite setts and tram lines, mill chimneys and pit heaps, fried fish shops and scouring stone are their salient features. Many years ago every town was covered with a constant pall of smoke from factory chimneys, which never lifted except at the annual feast holidays. "Where there's muck there's brass" was the saying, and the smoke was tacitly accepted as the inevitable penalty of prosperity. Since then times have changed. By some queer twist of economics cloth mills are shut down and the employees are too poor to buy themselves new clothes. The workmen need the

NONT SARAH'S

cloth which the millowners are so desperately anxious to sell—and the chimneys stand cold and smokeless while the men queue up at the Labour Exchange.

But the towns, with their teeming life and dirt and tragedy, lay far behind, and in front was the open country and the bare, smooth outline of the hills. Garden fences gave way to unmortared walls of black stone, lamp posts and tram lines ceased, and the noise of the tyres dropped to a gentle contented hum as smooth macadam replaced the harsh granite of the tram track.

Up and up went the sweeping gradient of the road, but the twin top gears of Drury's car made light of it, and presently there came in sight the three huge masts of the North Regional Broadcasting station—tall, lattice-work spears of slender gracefulness, girt with a delicate spider's web of bracing wires. The aerials, pulsing with invisible life and power, swung gently in the wind.

As the road bent in a left-hand curve round the corner of a hill the masts vanished from sight for a moment, and all at once the car emerged on to the backbone of England. A wild open expanse of desolate moor on the summit of the Pennine chain separates Yorkshire from Lancashire, a long narrow strip of practically uninhabited country in the midst of these densely populated counties. Just on

THE RAY OF DOOM

the other side lies another equally vast conglomeration of towns, and it is only ten miles from the tramlines of Huddersfield to the buses of Oldham. But so high and barren is the dividing line that the invisible nearness of millions of people merely accentuates and intensifies its loneliness. If it were not for the magnificent roads which cross it, one might be hundreds of miles away from civilisation. Surely a well selected place from The Liberator's point of view—skilfully chosen so as to ensure freedom from interference, together with the height which would give an unobstructed field for his rays.

Far ahead the sinuous outline of the road wriggled along to the horizon, flanked by telegraph poles which looked like the teeth of a gigantic comb. On the summit of the hill opposite they stood out sharply against the leaden sky with the clarity of palm trees on a coral reef. Rolling vistas of moorland extended to right and left until they were lost in the distant clouds.

"Brrr!" said McCarthy, buttoning his coat, for the wind was getting colder. "Shouldn't like to live up here." He jerked his head in the direction of an isolated cottage as he spoke.

The wireless masts came into sight again, and below them stood the power-houses of Moorside Edge—a squat, red range of buildings

NONT SARAH'S

with a grey concrete roof, standing in the middle of a chequerboard of old dry walls.

"Here's Nont Sarah's," said Drury, and McCarthy looked at the place with interest. It was not impressive. Merely a wayside public-house, only distinguished by its peculiar name and its isolated position. Beyond it the walls which had shut in the road faded out and disappeared, and the coarse tufted grass of the moor came right up to the edge of the tarred macadam. A line of roughly-built shooting butts straggled past on the still-rising ground, and the road ran under an intermittent corridor roof of guy ropes, which stretched across from the telegraph poles to posts on the opposite side in order to brace them to withstand the fierce winds of winter. Down in the next valley to the south, hundreds of feet below and several miles away, ran another main road, and glimpses of traffic could be seen crawling insect fashion up its inclines.

"We'd better go on to the other end," remarked Drury. "Then you'll get some idea what it's like."

The car swept in a magnificent curve round a huge ravine. Everywhere little ditches and channels were cut out of the curiously black soil by rain. Down distant hills water-courses could be seen—silver streaks against the all-prevailing grey monotony of the moorland turf. Their edges were picked out by the green of

THE RAY OF DOOM

finer grass as they careered joyously down into the imprisonment of corporation reservoirs at the bottom.

There are scores of lakes in this district, all pressed into the service of man. Many of them have one straight bank, which indicates a dam built across the valley by a town perhaps fifty miles away. In some of the valleys, as yet untouched by Acts of Parliament and water-works by-laws, were fields spread out in a patchwork of green and yellow. One or two of the higher hills had a drifting blanket of wet mist upon them, but here and there fleeting patches of watery sunshine broke through the clouds and danced across to relieve the grey monotone.

It was magnificent, if rather depressing, in its eerie wildness, and the nearness of bus services was unbelievable. The road was still rising and Nont Sarah's was out of sight. The telegraph wires, threaded with corks to warn unwary birds of their dangerous presence, sang their ceaseless song in the rush of the ever-present wind.

Drury crossed over a small bridge which spanned a little stream of beautiful clearness and, to allow a lorry to pass, steered the car close to a parapet wall which guarded the steep slope on the left. It was a stout dry wall, very thick and solid to withstand the shocks of cars that skidded or went off their

NONT SARAH'S

course in the mist and fog which so often enshroud the heights of the Pennines. That it had been tested beyond its strength was apparent, for just alongside McCarthy was an ominous three-yard patch of freshly-built masonry. A few hundred yards away was the highest point of the pass, where the road was joined by another from Halifax through Scamonden. Then the gradient began to descend, but reluctantly as though loath to leave the serene purity of the hill-side air for the smoke and fog of Manchester and Oldham. Wary and experienced sheep cropped the grass quite close, but kept out of danger with unexpected intelligence.

Drury drove on for another mile or two until the road could be seen crossing an embankment between two glittering sheets of water far below.

"No need to go on any farther now," he said. "You've seen all that matters. Just beyond that reservoir is Denshaw, where five roads meet. It's the end of this stretch."

"Right. Stop here a bit and we'll have a look at the map." The Chief Constable produced a large-scale Ordnance map and spread it out on his knees. "When The Liberator said Nont Sarah's I don't suppose he meant it literally," he began. "He would mean somewhere on this road, probably the highest point. Nont Sarah's itself is several hundred feet

THE RAY OF DOOM

lower, and I shouldn't think he'd want that. Of course the wireless station is down there, but then its masts are high enough to clear the summit. He won't have any masts, though. Still, we don't know. We've obviously got to look out for him on the whole stretch of this road—about eight or ten miles of it."

"Yes, from Outlane to Denshaw."

"That means we can't have men on foot surrounding it. We should want thousands of them to form a twenty-mile barrier in the dark. We can get as many men as we care to ask for of course, but we can't afford to risk scaring him away. There's only one way of doing it."

"Cars," said Drury.

"Yes, cars, and plenty of them. Fast ones. We shall want at least three at the Outlane end and three at Denshaw—no, better say half a dozen there, because there's a junction of five roads at that end. You never know—there might be a chase down three or four roads at the same time. We can't afford to take any chances. Another three on the road to Scammonden. That will pretty well seal up the entrances. Then we shall want some on the parallel roads north and south, in case he slips off across the moor. About four on each should do. One at each end and two on patrol."

"What about those little side roads at the Outlane end, sir?"

NONT SARAH'S

"They'll have to be stopped up. One lorry or bus in each. How many is that altogether?"

"Twenty cars and six lorries."

"That should do it. No, perhaps it's not quite enough after all. It would be a good thing to have a couple of lorries at each end and on the Scammonden road as well, so that they can be used as a barricade if necessary. For all we know The Liberator may have a whole squad of cars with him, and we don't want any of our decent ones smashing up. They may be needed."

"That makes twenty cars and twelve lorries altogether." Drury was making notes of the details.

"Our car will be extra, of course. The next point is, what about orders? If The Liberator comes across one of our sentry groups and gives them the slip, they've got to be able to get in touch with the rest of us and warn us which way he's going and that sort of thing. We ought to have a signaller in each car."

"Yes," agreed Drury doubtfully. "But you can't be sure that the signals would be seen by everybody. In fact, you can be quite certain that they wouldn't. There's so much up and down hill about this country, that lamps won't carry very far."

"We might get a searchlight or two," suggested McCarthy.

"That's a good idea. Searchlight beams up

THE RAY OF DOOM

in the air. They'd be able to see them for miles . . ." Drury stopped abruptly and swung round. "Wireless!" he said, pointing to the distant masts of Moorside Edge.

"Bright lad!" was McCarthy's comment. "If we arrange with the North Regional station to send out any messages we want, a portable set in each car will do the reception all right. What about getting messages to the station, though?"

"We'll have to get some field telephones from the War Office and rig them up in ditches—or anywhere we can hide them."

"And there'll have to be some way of finding them in the dark."

"That's easy enough. A red reflex mirror on the nearest telegraph pole. Then our headlights will pick them up."

"How many telephones shall we want?"

"One for each car and lorry—that's twenty-six. One every half-mile or so along this road, and a few extra ones. One or two up the Scammonden junction road, for instance. Say fifty altogether. As well as one searchlight to follow our car in case anything goes wrong with the phones or the wireless sets. That should be about the lot, I think. Let's get back now and work it out in detail and see exactly what we do want."

* * * * *

NONT SARAH'S

The two Scotland Yard men were very busy during the remainder of that day. McCarthy spent the best part of two hours telephoning to the Commissioner, and Drury went shopping in Huddersfield. His purchases were extensive and peculiar. He first went round all the stationers' shops and bought up every map he could find which included the Outlane-Denshaw road. Then he went along to a cycle shop and came away with two dozen red reflex mirrors. His next visit was to a cheap multiple tailors, where he ordered a hundred thirty-shilling suits, of assorted sizes and patterns, to be delivered without fail in two hours' time. Then there were twelve lorries to hire and twelve tradesman's vans—McCarthy was arranging about the other cars. As an afterthought, Drury contracted for a thirteenth van on his own responsibility. This he turned over to a café, with orders that it should be loaded with twenty gallons of hot coffee and a hundred-weight of ham sandwiches by six o'clock the next evening. Food and hot drinks were essential for men who were to spend the night on the bleak heights of the Pennines.

His next visit was to an Army Surplus store, where he bought several small tents of the kind used by Boy Scouts and hikers. This concluded his programme and he returned to the hotel, where he found McCarthy still telephoning, this time to the local Chief Constable,

THE RAY OF DOOM

asking for an interview. His talk with the Commissioner had been highly satisfactory. All his plans were approved and a definite promise was given that everything asked for would be supplied at once. There would be no obstruction or delay, for the Commissioner had instant access to the Prime Minister as his trump card. Twelve fast police cars would be sent from London at once, with drivers. It was not convenient to send more, but the Commissioner suggested, and McCarthy agreed, that it would be easy to borrow the remaining eight from local police forces. The War Office contribution to the campaign might be expected to arrive early the next morning. While on the subject of the War Office, the Commissioner offered, if necessary, to borrow sufficient troops to surround the whole area, but McCarthy turned this down. Roughly, one battalion a mile would be needed to form a reliable barrier in the darkness—perhaps twenty thousand men in all. It could be done, short as the notice was, but all Lancashire and Yorkshire would know about it long before midnight, and the chances of snaring The Liberator would be *nil*.

"No," said McCarthy, and this was his final word. "Our only hope is to keep out of sight and let him turn up to time. The less men we have prowling about the better."

The whole of the rest of the evening was

NONT SARAH'S

occupied by a conference with the Chief Constables of the districts involved and their superintendents.

* * * * *

At eight o'clock on the morning of the twenty-ninth a company of Royal Engineers tumbled out of the train at Huddersfield station and proceeded to unload a motor searchlight, many drums of telephone cable and a multitude of boxes and packing cases. They were promptly marched to police head-quarters, where they were fitted out with the ready-made suits of civilian clothes previously ordered by Drury. These had been unpacked and left all night in tumbled heaps in order to take off their air of extreme newness. Several stalwart constables had also spent a few hours walking on them, with the result that their virgin freshness had already begun to droop and wither. Cheap suits do not require much of this sort of treatment to make them very second-hand in appearance. Laughing and joking at the novelty of the situation, the engineers were sent off in small squads to the hired tradesman's vans, which came right into the courtyard so that the embarkation could be carried through without publicity. Each squad took three or four telephones and their share of cable.

Commercial vans had been chosen for this

THE RAY OF DOOM

work because they could stop by the roadside without attracting attention. This they did, while the occupants spent the morning installing their instruments. Many and varied were the devices adopted for concealment. In many places a row of three or four roughly-constructed turf shooting-butts was built and the telephone hidden behind one of them.

When a young sapper complained at the labour involved in building butts of which only one in four was used, the bowler-hatted sergeant overheard him and explained that shooting-butts were never built singly but always in rows. This was the only complaint heard during that hectic twenty-four hours. The men thoroughly enjoyed the break in their usual routine and the novelty of being disguised as civilians. Like the crews of the mystery ships during the War, they were instructed to avoid formality and any appearance of discipline, so that they might pass for roadmen or telephone linesmen.

To be able to spit in the presence of the sergeant and to slouch past the lieutenant with a casual nod was ample compensation for a night in the train and the prospect of another on the moors. Habit dies hard, however, and they found it difficult to resist standing to attention when the captain came round on a tour of inspection.

Two or three of the telephones were hidden

NONT SARAH'S

under the road itself, where it crossed over streams which fed the reservoirs below. Another was concealed among the rocks which flanked the road at one place, and four more were in the small tents which Drury had bought for the purpose. These were conspicuous but very natural and innocent-looking objects in such open country. The work was finally completed before dark, and a network of invisible wires ran over the moor from fifty different places to converge upon the wireless station at Moorside edge.

At several points the hastily-laid cables had to cross the road itself, but this difficulty was easily surmounted. They were led along the grass to a telegraph pole, lightly tacked up the pole to the top and then taken across the guy-rope and down the post at the other side. If it had not been for these providential helps it would have been very difficult to cross the bare macadam safely and inconspicuously. A plain grey-painted lorry was secured for the use of the men who did this work, and it was quite a passable imitation of a Post Office repair van.

During the afternoon the sergeant discarded his bowler hat, much to the regret of his admiring men, and motor-cycled along the whole line with a pocketful of red reflectors, one of which he nailed on to a telegraph pole near each instrument. He was clad in a yellow

THE RAY OF DOOM

oilskin suit and a peaked cap, and his borrowed motor-cycle had a yellow tank. Unless it was very closely inspected the whole outfit bore, as it was intended to bear, a very close resemblance to one of the road patrols of the Automobile Association. Thus equipped he could have nailed red discs on to every telegraph pole in the country without exciting any comment. When he had used the last of the twenty-four it occurred to him that he ought to have another two dozen, to fix on to the posts on his return journey, so that they could be identified equally well from either direction. So, without waiting for instructions, he went on into Oldham and bought them, clearing out the entire stock of two cycle shops and one garage. This easily-remedied oversight was the sole defect in the organisation so laboriously worked out by Drury and McCarthy.

As soon as it was dark the sergeant went over the ground again with Drury in order to make certain that all his reflectors could be easily found in the rays of the headlights. One or two of them had to be readjusted, and that was all.

A number had been allotted to each field telephone, and its exact situation marked on McCarthy's map. The numbers were neatly inked in and duplicate copies made for the car parties. The officer in charge of the engineers had made his own map, which included many

NONT SARAH'S

things not required by the others, such as the exact routes taken by all his cables and the names of the men told off for each station.

Every car and lorry, with the exception of the vans, whose duties would be finished long before dark and which would then take no further part in the operations, was allotted a distinguishing letter, to avoid confusion with the telephones along the roadside. This letter was painted on the windscreen of each vehicle and a complete list of them, with their appointed stations, entered on the back of each map. One signaller armed with a shutter lamp and a portable wireless set was told off to each car. The former were Army property and the latter were borrowed from members of the Huddersfield and West Riding police. A signal lamp was also supplied to every telephone station, so that visual messages could be flashed down the line if necessary.

The cables from all the telephones were connected to a temporary exchange rigged up in the B.B.C. station at Moorside Edge, and the circuits were tested and found to be in working order. All the wireless sets were also tested and adjusted to the North Regional wavelength.

When this work was completed McCarthy had the satisfaction of knowing that his network of communications was as complete as

THE RAY OF DOOM

it was possible to make it. He or his subordinates could telephone to Moorside Edge from any one of fifty different places, and Moorside Edge could send back replies to them all, even to the cars actually in motion. The original plan of having wireless sets in the cars only had been amplified, and every telephone group now had one, as a safeguard against interruption by breakage of cables. In addition to all this, the travelling searchlight and the Morse signal lamps formed a reserve line of defence.

The car which Drury and McCarthy proposed to use—which became known as the flagship—was fitted with a couple of headlights behind in case quick reversing was necessary on the narrow and dangerous road. In order that the police vehicles could be distinguished in the darkness from other traffic a vertical strip of thin green paper was pasted on to the inner side of their lamp glasses. All of them were supplied with transparent yellow covers for their headlights, in case of fog.

The proposed plan of campaign was roughly as follows. It was recognised that it was useless to stop traffic at random on this and the neighbouring roads, because no one knew what The Liberator looked like. It might be possible, by searching his luggage, to prove his identity by means of his apparatus, but if all the night traffic was held up and searched there would be such congestion and confusion that his

NONT SARAH'S

suspensions would certainly be aroused as soon as he approached.

It was known that his ray-exposure, to coincide with the others, must take place at 1 a.m. exactly. He might therefore be expected to arrive a little time before this. Probably, almost certainly, his car would have to be stationary during the time the ray apparatus was working, and presumably the engine would have to be kept running in order to supply the necessary current. The wisest course seemed to be to keep all precautions hidden as far as possible and allow him to carry out his original plan. Drury and McCarthy proposed to start from Outlane a few minutes before one o'clock and make a rapid patrol as far as Denshaw; at the same moment the local police chiefs were to start from Denshaw and do the same in the reverse direction. Any stationary car with the engine running would at once be detected. At one precisely all the exits were to be closed; traffic was to be allowed to pass freely into the guarded section but was to be stopped at the far end. Lorries were to be drawn across the road so as to obstruct all outward traffic, which was to be marshalled on to the grass some distance away and detained. The lights of "captured" cars were to be put out and their occupants not allowed to make a noise. The engines of the lorries were to be running all the time and the drivers were to keep up the

THE RAY OF DOOM

pretence that they were turning round. This would afford an excuse to draw aside when inward-bound traffic desired to pass. Theoretically The Liberator should then be somewhere in the trap. It would only remain to find him. As soon as he was found a telephone message could free all the other suspects at once. If he were not identified during the night then they were all to be detained until the morning for further investigation. A high-handed method, but absolutely necessary. As McCarthy had said, the finer points of the law with regard to the liberty of the subject would have to be disregarded for the time being.

All watches were carefully synchronised so that there should be no confusion about times, but it was not anticipated that watches would really be needed, for Moorside Edge was to send out a signal at one o'clock, the critical moment at which the trap was timed to shut.

The engineers had brought a field kitchen with them, but this was not allowed to go farther than Huddersfield police station. It was set to work in the yard and the food it cooked was transferred to a covered lorry, which took it up on to the moors and distributed it at midday and again at tea-time. With the latter meal were sent round waterproof ground-sheets and a general order to the effect that every man was to get what sleep he could, but on no account to go out of earshot of his telephone

NONT SARAH'S

bell. This applied particularly to the soldiers and the London chauffeurs, who had missed a night's rest. It was a tribute to the unobtrusive nature of all these preparations that not one of the many motorists who passed during the day appeared to notice anything unusual.

* * * * *

At twelve o'clock midnight Drury and McCarthy were waiting by the Huddersfield tram terminus. On the back seat of the car was their signaller and the wireless set. The latter was switched on, and very, very faint sounds of dance music came from it, so subdued that it could only just be heard. A few yards behind was another pair of green-tinged side lamps, over which loomed the dim bulk of the searchlight.

The signal sergeant lolled on the seat with his head close to the loud speaker, and from time to time hummed snatches of the music. The two men in front sat in grim silence. There was really nothing to say and a good deal to think about. Everything was ready, every preparation and precaution that human foresight and wisdom could suggest. Nothing could be altered now; men and machines were waiting in their appointed positions ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. McCarthy gave a little sigh of utter weariness, for he had had very little rest during the last forty-eight

THE RAY OF DOOM

hours, and had borne a crushing burden of responsibility.

Miltiades at Marathon made the fateful decision which saved the infant civilisation of the West from the domination of the East; twelve centuries further down the march of time Charles Martel, the Hammer of God, rolled back the advancing tide of Islam when it threatened to submerge Christendom for ever; but not even these bore such a burden as the two men who sat in a prosaic sports saloon on the Manchester road twelve hundred years later still. For their battle was waged in the dark against an unknown enemy, and the penalty of failure was not the overthrow of a civilisation or a religion, but universal death. Little wonder that they were not talkative.

For the thousandth time McCarthy unfolded his map and looked at it in the light of the dashboard lamp. The action was purely mechanical, for every detail of it was stamped indelibly on his brain. He could have recited from memory the letters and numbers of every one of his patrol groups and their exact order and position; so could Drury.

The gentle hum of the dance music in the background faded away and stopped altogether. Drury looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was just midnight. Another quarter of an hour before the first order flashed over the wires to rouse all hands to action stations. Fifty-

NONT SARAH'S

eight minutes to go before their own part in the drama began.

For once the fates were kind and there was no mist or fog upon the hills. The night was dark, very dark, but that mattered not when efficient headlamps were available. Fog was the one real danger to be feared, against which no precautions were of much use, and Drury had suffered agonies of apprehension on this account during the earlier part of the evening, for fogs are very common at Nont Sarah's. Vivid mental pictures floated before him in which he saw all their organisation useless, blinded and blotted out by thick rolling walls of mist. In imagination he saw The Liberator drive his car off the road on to the moor into utter invisibility, abandon it when his deadly work was done and strike out across country to freedom, unseen by the watchers. But the glittering vault of stars overhead remained clean cut and distinct, and the distant lights of Huddersfield shone out clear and undimmed. Drury took new heart from this. Perhaps the Creator didn't want His world destroying, after all.

By this time the road was practically deserted. An occasional car or mail van droned past up the hill, but at longer and longer intervals—not more than one every two or three minutes. As each one passed Drury gripped the wheel in front of him until his fingers ached. The

THE RAY OF DOOM

intolerable strain of this silent vigil was getting on his nerves. Mad, irrational impulses seized him to chase every car as it passed—anything, anything rather than this awful waiting. The minutes went by with deadly deliberation, almost as slowly as on that fearful night in Chancery Lane. He smoked cigarette after cigarette in short, quick pulls which burned his tongue and filled the ash-tray to overflowing. McCarthy took it from its slot and emptied it out of the window—it was something to do.

At five minutes past midnight there was a welcome interlude. The coffee van which Drury had ordered the day before, and since completely forgotten, arrived with steaming pint mugs and gigantic sandwiches. It had started its errand about half-past nine and worked backwards from Denshaw towards Huddersfield. Its load was now light, but there was just enough left, and the hot drink felt to put new life into the tired men.

A faint voice whispered softly from the loud speaker. It was the captain of Engineers speaking from Moorside Edge.

"All stations stand by. Telephones one to twenty-four will ring up exchange as their numbers are called out. Number one, ready. . . ."

For ten minutes this went on, the quiet, unemotional voice calling out the numbers one by one. Drury thought of the hidden activity

NONT SARAH'S

all down the dark, invisible line—the faint buzzing of muffled bells the eager faces of the awakened operators crouching in their cramped hiding places. Whatever the result the scheme was a good one, anxiously thought out and carried through with extreme care and thoroughness. There seemed to be no loopholes anywhere.

The voice spoke again.

"Telephones A to Y will now report. Letter A. . . ."

There was a click as the flagship sergeant took up the receiver.

"Hallo, exchange. Telephone A speaking. All correct, thanks. Any orders, sir?"

McCarthy shook his head.

"Telephone B . . ." droned the pygmy voice softly, and the sergeant lit another cigarette. Telephone B was out of his jurisdiction for the moment.

The waiting was not quite so bad now that something was happening, even if it was merely preliminary circuit testing. Anything was better than that helpless, impotent feeling that nothing was being done.

The sergeant leaned out of the window and spoke. "Get her uncovered," he said, and dim figures busied themselves round the car behind. The tarpaulin cover was dragged off the searchlight and stowed away.

A blue uniformed, helmeted figure strolled leisurely up the road and disappeared into the

THE RAY OF DOOM

night. It was far too dark to see properly, but something in the policeman's walk struck Drury as vaguely familiar. A Royal Mail van hurtled past with a crashing of gears as the driver changed clumsily for the next corner. The loud speaker had been silent for the last five minutes. That meant the time was getting near. . . . Drury moistened his parched lips and looked at his watch again. Seven minutes to one. He pressed the self-starter and the still warm engine fired at once. He let it tick over gently. McCarthy turned to the sergeant.

"Better unship your phone now."

The signaller lifted out his instrument and carefully disentangled its wires from the door handle. He deposited it at the foot of a nearby telegraph pole and climbed back into the car. Two minutes to one.

"Let her go," said McCarthy, "and God help us."

Drury let in his clutch and the quest began. The blinding glare of the huge headlights stabbed through the darkness and lit up the deserted country-side with silvery radiance. Another glare behind proclaimed that the search-light carrier was following. The whine of the gear-box dropped in sudden jumps as Drury changed from second to third and from third to top. The speedometer needle kept steady at forty. The road ahead was as light as day compared to the inky walls of blackness which

NONT SARAH'S

rushed past on either side. The dark bulk of two lorries loomed up in front and Drury slowed down. They were approaching the guarded section. Both lorries were awkwardly straddled across the road as if in the act of turning round. The inspector touched the horn button and one of them reversed so as to leave a gap big enough to get through. But instead of passing Drury put on his brakes and stopped, for he had seen the little group of excited men clustered round a helmeted figure with a notebook in its hand.

"I want your names and addresses," the policeman was saying. "For obstruction. You've been messing about across this here road for over ten minutes. What d'you think you're doing?"

"Can't help it, sergeant. It's our orders."

"Orders? What, orders to block up main roads? Who's your employers?"

A frenzied whisper was heard from the ditch near by.

"Hallo, exchange. I want to speak to the captain, please. Is that you, sir? What are we to do? There's a policeman here ordering us to move on. What's that, sir? Carry on in execution of previous orders? Right you are, sir. Tie him up and put him in the lorry if he won't believe us? Very good, sir. No, we won't 'urt 'im. Catch 'old of him, boys." The concluding remark came in a shout from

the ditch. The policeman stepped back and drew his truncheon, a lone figure against hopeless odds.

"Here, wait a minute," said McCarthy. "Stop this. It's all right. I'm a Chief Constable and these men are here by my orders."

"Chief Constable, are you?" grunted the valiant policeman, tugging at his whistle cord. "I've heard that tale before. You're no more like the Chief than I am. Motor bandits, more likely." Another second and the whistle would have shrilled out its alarm, but Drury had recognised his man. He opened the door and almost fell out into the road. With one leap he sprang across and threw his arms round the constable, who was watching the approach of his other assailants. The whistle clinked against a button as its owner dropped it. Wildly grabbing his truncheon, which was hanging by its wrist thong, he swung it up as far as he could against the powerful grip of Drury's restraining arms. There was a crack as the pathetically ineffectual weapon descended upon the inspector's head. It was only a wrist stroke with no real force behind it.

"Farmer!" shouted Drury, as thousands of whirling stars danced before his eyes, "don't blow that damned whistle!"

Thirty seconds hasty explanation converted Farmer Jackson—late of Osmondthorne—from a foe into an enthusiastic ally, and as an instinc-

tive tribute to his valour in tackling unknown men at such a time and place he was pushed into the vacant seat of Drury's car, with instructions to remove his helmet and cover up his buttons.

"Sure you're all right?" asked McCarthy, somewhat anxiously.

"Quite, thanks," said Drury, tenderly running an exploring hand over his head. "Feels sore, that's all, and there's the makings of a good old bump on it."

"It's a good thing you'd got hold of my arms," remarked Jackson. "Or I should have laid you out properly." He spoke in apologetic tones, but his thoughts were tinged with a faint regret. It was the first time in all his years of peaceful service that he had ever drawn his truncheon with intent to hurt anybody—and he hadn't made a proper job of it!

Drury jumped back into the driving seat and slid round the traffic block. Once through the gap he accelerated to make up for lost time. Nont Sarah's flashed dimly past, distinguished from one or two neighbouring cottages by its petrol pump, and then began the real ascent to the top of the pass. Every half-mile a little red dot proclaimed the reassuring presence of an invisible telephone station—a dot that shone and faded again as they drew level with it.

A mail van and a lone motor-cyclist were

THE RAY OF DOOM

overtaken in the next few hundred yards, and more red rear lights were visible in the distance. Several of them could be seen moving as they followed the curves of the road, but one appeared to be stationary. Nearer and nearer it came. No, it was certainly not moving. And it was too bright and steady for one of the reflex discs. Drury took his foot off the accelerator and came to a standstill about fifty yards behind it. He turned the dashboard switch and the hum of the engine died away into silence. McCarthy opened the door and put his head out.

"His engine's running," he said. "Sounds queer, too." The quiet deep-toned drumming of the exhaust was distinctly audible, but there was a strange high pitched noise rising above it. Not very loud, not even very remarkable to a casual observer, but it sounded as though something was revolving at very high speed. Perhaps it was a supercharger—but superchargers are not fitted to cheap mass-produced cars.

"Sounds like a dynamo," whispered Drury.

The Chief Constable got out.

"Come with me, Jackson. You're in uniform and you can ask to see his driving licence. It'll be a good excuse to talk to him. You stop here, Drury. You can close up a bit if you like."

Jackson and McCarthy walked up the lane

NONT SARAH'S

of light leading to the other car. Drury restarted his engine and crept slowly after them. They reached it and stopped; Jackson's tunic buttons glittered as he stood by the driver's seat.

The high-pitched humming noise ceased abruptly and there was a brilliant flash of blue flame on the roof of the car. Drury thought he saw the outline of a small aerial in the glare. A puff of smoke came from the exhaust pipe, and the tyres whirled and scabbled on the tar-covered surface as the car leapt forward. Jackson jumped for the footboard, missed it and tripped up McCarthy as he fell. The two men scrambled to their feet and saw the rear-light rapidly vanishing.

"Go after him!" roared McCarthy, running in the opposite direction as hard as he could. Drury trod on the accelerator, and the well-tuned engine screamed aloud as it hurled the saloon forward. The signal sergeant was flung violently against the back of the seat. He braced his legs against the floorboards, seized the handle of the wireless set, which was not meant to stand this sort of treatment, and looked out of the rear window.

Farmer Jackson was standing still, brushing the dust off his uniform in a dazed kind of way. McCarthy's long legs were flying down the road, and he was already nearly out of sight in the gloom. Evidently he was making for the nearest telephone to give the alarm to

THE RAY OF DOOM

the Denshaw barrier. No doubt Jackson, knowing nothing of the preparations which had been made, was paralysed with amazement to see him running in the wrong direction. But the sergeant saw no more, for his whole time was occupied in keeping himself on the seat and protecting the precious wireless from damage. As soon as he had got himself firmly wedged in and could spare a hand, he cautiously turned on the volume control, for he realised that far more power was now needed to hear the voice of Moorside Edge above the howl of the hard-driven engine. Presently it spoke.

"Flagship A is now pursuing a car, believed to contain The Liberator, in the direction of Denshaw. Barrier lorries K and L at the Denshaw end are to close the road at once. Telephone stations are to report as the cars pass them."

Up and up went the speedometer needle—forty, forty-five, fifty, and the car rocked and swayed like a ship in a storm. With a sickening lurch it swung round a left-hand corner with the tyres screaming a protest at the unmerciful treatment, and the signal sergeant blinked as he saw a wall flash past a few inches from the window. The red light in front was losing ground, for the semi-racing police car

NONT SARAH'S

could take the gradients at a much higher speed.

A pair of headlights appeared over the brow of the hill and their rays swept round full into Drury's face. The speedometer registered sixty-three, and he could only just see the edge of the road. The blinding glare dazzled his eyes, and his head, already aching from Jackson's well-meant truncheon, throbbed intolerably. The oncomer was taking up more than his share of room. Was there width enough to get through? The sergeant shut his eyes and waited for the crash. The blare of the horn rose loud and long, and the pace slackened a little. With a rush and a whizz the other car was past, and the sergeant wiped the sweat off his forehead. The next moment he was nearly flung off the seat again as Drury braked for a sharp corner. It was a brute of a curve, almost a hairpin, and the back wheels skidded as they went round it. The sergeant could have sworn they touched the wall.

Another pair of headlights, this time tinged with green, came into view; evidently the other patrol. Drury put his thumb firmly on the horn button and kept it there. A long, wailing shriek howled its way down-wind. The Liberator's car was now only thirty yards ahead. It had run very well for a standard touring saloon. It must have averaged over fifty all

THE RAY OF DOOM

the way, but it was no match for a super-tuned sports model, and he had lost nearly all the advantage gained at the start, when his pursuer had to wait for McCarthy and Farmer Jackson to pick themselves up from under his front wheels. There came another tremendous lurch forward as Drury put on the brakes; he had just realised that the car with the green lamps was standing still in the middle of the road. The acrid smell of burning rubber came up through the floorboards from the sliding tyres on the locked wheels, and Drury slightly lessened the pressure on the pedal. The steering wheel twisted savagely at his hands as he skilfully coaxed it backwards and forwards to correct the skidding.

The Denshaw patrol must have picked up the wireless message and decided to stop the runaway; and they had chosen a good place. The road was cut out of the side of a hill, with rocks overhanging on one side and a guard wall at the other. There was no possible chance of getting past. The Liberator's car in front swayed drunkenly; glittering streams of granite chips flew up from its wheels as its driver braked, but it still seemed to be going at a dangerous speed. Drury, hanging on to his bucking wheel with both hands, breathed prayers of thankfulness for the hydraulic brakes which were slowing him down with such marvellous power and certainty. A hail of

NONT SARAH'S

granite chips rattled on his windscreen. It was all over in a couple of seconds from the time the green light hove in sight.

There was a rending, tearing crash as The Liberator's car, altogether out of control, hit the retaining wall. His lamps went out and that sickening smashing metallic noise ceased. A succession of dull bumps and thuds and then silence. A few stones fell from the shattered wall and rolled lazily down the hill.

Drury's car slithered to a standstill a few feet short of the ragged gap in the broken masonry, and even as he jumped out there was a flash of fire and a sheet of flame shot up in the valley below.

Little dark running frantic figures leapt through the torn and ruined wall and plunged down the slope, stumbling and cursing over the uneven ground, tripping and falling over tufts and tussocks of grass in the pitch darkness. The signal sergeant fell into a ditch and sat whitefaced where he fell, nursing a swollen and badly sprained ankle.

A blinding ray of welcome light cut through the blackness as the searchlight crew pulled up and came into action. Sobbing and gasping for breath the rescuers ran on, in the hope of saving from that flaring bonfire the man whose egotism and vanity had so nearly led to universal ruin. As they approached the shattered wreck the heat grew unbearable.

THE RAY OF DOOM

The flames of the burning petrol blazed and roared; a circle of smouldering grass spread slowly outwards and the stench of burning rubber and blistering paint rolled across the moor in evil-smelling clouds. Pinned down under the wreckage were charred remains which had once been a man, but it was impossible to approach.

And there in the blazing funeral pyre of a madman lay the safety of the world.

THE END

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